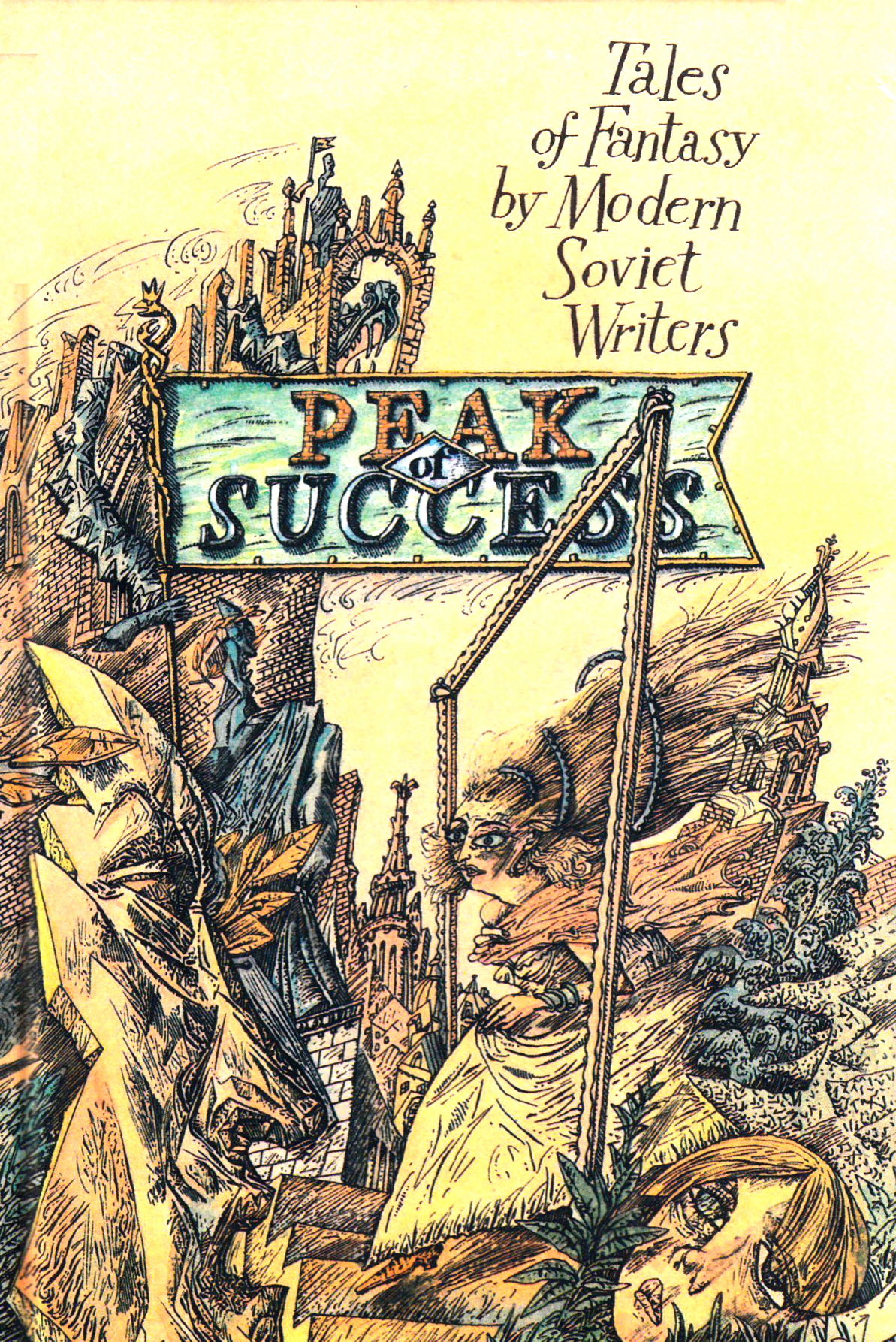
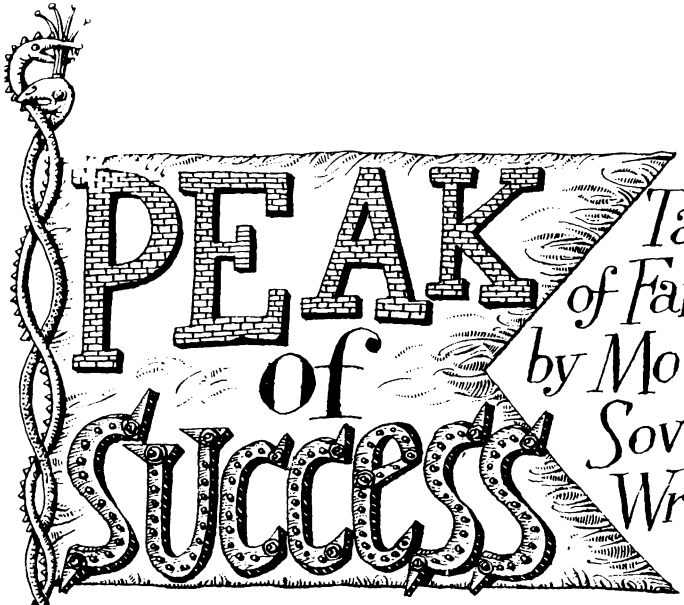

Tales
of Fantasy
by Modern
Soviet
Writers
PEAK
of
SUCCESS



Tales of Fantasy by Modern Soviet Writers

Raduga Publishers · Moscow

Translation from the Russian
Designed by *A. Baldin*

Пик удачи (Современная сказка)

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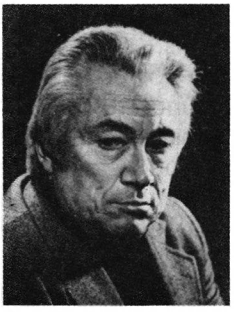
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Yuri Nagibin (b. 1920) published his first short story in 1940. His name is associated with a whole trend in the development of the Soviet short story from the 1950s to the 1980s. His writing is extremely wide-ranging: from stories about the Second World War, controversial novellas set in the present day, tales about childhood and children, sportsmen, hunting and the Russian countryside, and historical novellas about figures in Russian and world culture. He has now published more than fifty collections of stories in a total of over twenty million copies. A collection of his stories *An Unwritten Story by Somerset Maugham* was published in English in 1988.



PEAK OF SUCCESS

A modern fairy tale

They walked out of the National Palace which was encircled by a high fortified wall built way back in the Middle Ages and reinforced over the centuries against the ever growing might of the invader. After reaching the limits of fortificational perfection, the wall then turned into an embellishment for the city, because means of attack were developing much faster than means of defense, and its might, thickness, height, and the firing potential of its embrasures had become a mere pretence before the destructive capacity of modern weaponry. But the wall was beautiful. The sky in its loopholes seemed far more blue than the city skies and full of ancient tales and legends. The doves over its towers never flew down to the ground to scavenge for food amid street litter. And the

grass on the gentle slopes which ran from the foot of the wall to the edge of the paved square, the asphalted embankment and park railings was an incredible green, with a stormy, metallic glint when the north wind blew.

As they walked out through the gateway, the main tower, the Tower of Time, emitted a round, echoing stroke, which seemed to fall into water—Gray even thought he heard the splash—and the chimed moment sank into the river of time as a stone sinks into a stream. Gray listened, but the other eleven strokes were absorbed by his own ear, and the mysterious substance of which our very life is composed revealed itself no more.

"What a strange, sinister invention a clock is!" Gray thought, looking at the huge black disc on the tower with gold spear-like hands and signs of the zodiac instead of numbers round the edge. "Death's custodian, who does not allow us for an instant to forget that the shagreen leather of life is for ever shrinking."

Recently he found the idea of death unpleasant. Before he hadn't thought about death at all, ignoring it to such an extent that he never went to funerals not only of relatives but of the few people whom he held in high regard. He had wanted his own funeral to be as simple, quick and inconspicuous as possible. Death is the end of life, and the only interesting thing is life, when the greatest of all the miracles of creation, the human mind, is working. As for all those well-meaning absurdities about dissolving into nature and new forms of being which arise after the destruction of our earthly shell, Gray would not even listen to such rubbish. Death is sterile, capable of nothing but destruction, and Gray did not wish to have any falsely meaningful relations with it. Then suddenly a short while ago he had begun to feel afraid...

Moore saw Gray look at the tower clock, but interpreted this in his own way.

"I expect it's sad to see the hour of one's greatest triumph passing?" he asked in his oily voice, to which he tried in vain to impart a hint of subtle irony.

"What was that?" Gray had not understood him.

Moore looked askance at his companion. He himself was a past master of dissimulation, but dissembling in others, something against the rules and aimed at disorientating those

around, angered him deeply. Could the sly devil really be pretending that he was not over the moon with happiness? Why is your wretched face still so white, Gray, even whiter than your starched collar?

Recently you have shown an unpleasant absent-mindedness... You either don't understand what people say to you. Or rather, pretend not to understand. Must the price of your success be losing your good manners?

Like a diver coming up from the sea-bed, Gray was gradually returning to reality: he caught glimpses of coral reefs, seaweed shivered and swayed, and monstrous-looking fish wriggled their fin-bodies, but then the green semi-transparence of the water parted, the sun flooded into his eyes, and earthly reality was embodied in the massive, satin-cheeked face of Professor Moore with its brown, naked and consequently somewhat defenceless eyes, the aristocratic, well-groomed, impressive and mortified face of the envious rival.

Gray squirmed inwardly. His new, recently acquired perception was unwelcome. He did not want to discover anything new in himself. It merely intensified the sense of loss. He wanted to stay the same as before, down to the very last detail of his inner self and his outward behaviour. He derived no pleasure at all from the sudden realisation that the well-known, almost famous Professor Moore, a corresponding member of many academies, with whom he had been racking his brains for the last quarter of a century over the same problem, experiencing the same flashes of insight, failures, hopes and disappointments, that this talented, strong, patient man, whom Gray had always thought of as selflessly devoted to science, was prey to all-consuming envy. And, feeling sorry for him, Gray did something for him one should never do for anyone.

"Don't be angry. I'm not feeling too good. My wife's left me."

Moore was shorter than him. He stood there, his naked, brown eyes boring into his rival's chest. He saw the dark, neatly knotted tie, the smooth, narrow lapels of the well-made suit and, in the button-hole of the left lapel the large (inordinately large) gold (unmistakably gold!) medal with the inscription "To the Benefactor of Mankind". My God, it had all come true! And the celebrations he had been forced to

attend were not just a bad dream! There had been fanfares and violins, some incredibly heartfelt and highflown speeches so full of emotion that words and gestures were inadequate and the speakers ended up in tears, a cheque for a million dollars, and the extraordinary award of a Nobel prize (for the first time since the foundation of the Nobel Institute), academic laurels of all sorts and, finally, to crown it all, a token of universal acclaim and gratitude in the form of a gold medal "To the Benefactor of Mankind" and a diploma signed by the heads of all the states in the world.

And it could all have gone to him, Moore! But he had backed the wrong horse. Who could have thought that success lay along the most uncertain, compromised path, one that had been rejected by all specialists! Why had Gray latched on to anti-viruses so doggedly? Through stupidity, fatigue, despair or blind faint-heartedness? Now it would be called by that deceitful word "genius". But how could such an ordinary research scientist, who seemed no different from all the rest, suddenly turn his back on world authorities and set off alone along the abandoned path? The man must really be a genius, or if not a genius, a fanatic obsessed by some high-minded mania? But what fanatic or genius has a first-class tailor and knots his tie with the flourish of a *bon viveur*? Geniuses have no time for such trivia. He was your man in the street, your average white-collar worker, the most commonplace specimen of present-day humanity. Yet he did have something! He was hard-working, assiduous and, of course, had a pretty good, keen brain. Still he had won a million on a tram ticket. It wasn't the first time in the turbulent history of mankind that such a thing had happened. Columbus stumbled upon America, thinking it was India, yet he is said to have discovered it, that is, to have performed a conscious act of will. Gray had also stumbled upon something... Yet only unlike Columbus he had found what he was looking for. Columbus was genuinely great in his fanaticism, his faith and his inspired selflessness, whereas Gray... Still what did all this matter now? Gray was a benefactor of mankind, and the rest of it was of no interest to anyone. Gray had condemned to unemployment thousands of researchers who had devoted their brains and heart to the same problem. Now they had nothing to do. The task of adapting the new method to the

various forms of the disease was a matter for the staff of the newly founded "Gray World Institute". For the extraordinary fact was that Gray had discovered a *universal* method of completely curing cancer!

"But why tell me that his wife has left him? What do I care about that? And why should he care himself about being left by some silly bitch who is probably kicking herself now for making such a boob. Fancy throwing a million dollars down the drain and the title of 'Mrs Benefactor of Mankind' into the bargain! And who was she anyway, that wife of his? Probably nothing much, if I hadn't even heard of her. He couldn't really be upset by a thing like that! He was just tossing me a bone to console me. 'Don't envy me, I've got my troubles too...' So he must have guessed that I envy him!" Moore felt as if he were choking. "What a nerve to talk to me about that useless woman, how foul of him to pretend to be unhappy for the benefit of me, whose life he has deprived of all meaning, how disgusting of him to guess that I am suffering!"

The back of his neck felt unpleasantly tight and his temples constricted painfully. Don't be in a hurry to kick the bucket! In a month's time the monument will be unveiled in Central Square to the "Great Curer from Grateful Mankind", then you can come and peg out at the foot of this memorial to the foul triumph of blind luck!

Moore turned on his heel and strode off, without saying goodbye. He was impelled by the instinct of self-preservation. His nervous and circulatory systems were at breaking-point. A few more seconds of close proximity to Gray and something irreparable might have happened. By taking flight, he was saving his blood vessels, his heart, his reason and, perhaps, his life...

Gray did not attach any importance to Professor Moore's sudden departure or, rather, flight. The mention of his wife had immediately made him retreat into his pain and become incapable of human contact. He had discussed the break-up of his marriage with no one, and only Moore's pangs of envy had impelled him to mention it for the first time. He had simply felt sorry for this man who was suffering, because he was suffering himself...

His wife was like a malignant tumour, but his universal cure was of no use here. The tumour might not be felt for a long

time, but then one incautious movement would spark off either an unbearably sharp, but quickly passing pain or a long, dull, gnawing ache. He was constantly aware of the presence of foreign malignant cells in himself, but was sometimes able to forget about his illness, to ignore it and live as if nothing had happened. But at other times the disease made him delve into himself and drag all the hidden pain up to the surface so he could analyse it in an almost scientific way from behind a kind of barrier. And for this he liked to be alone. In general he was glad when his acquaintances went away, did not ring when they had said they would or forgot to turn up as arranged. These sudden gifts of freedom, time and not having to concern himself with trifles were precious. How nice, kind and tactful these absent-minded, unreliable people are!

Mentally thanking Moore for his sudden departure, Gray forgot about him at once and set off in a different direction, along the city wall towards the river.

The river was no embellishment to the life of the city. It was not a symbol like the Thames, the Neva or the Seine. Only the occasional sailing yacht disturbed its flaccid, unmuscular surface. The turbid water covered with a film of oil did not reflect the sky and was therefore not flecked with blue or gold, only slightly diffused with light by the granite banks. But when Gray reached the parapet and leaned on the cold stone, he felt a strange peace, repose, almost happiness. Now he did not want to delve down into himself, preferring to entrust himself unthinkingly and calmly to this pleasant sensation. He looked at the water, at the opposite bank with its faceless modern blocks of flats, the Gothic flimsiness of the aged cathedral dwarfed by towering glass boxes, and the sad stumpy chimney-stacks of the old tobacco factory—the honeyed scent of its pipe tobacco could be smelt even from here.

Looked at from a distance the water seemed motionless, like pond water, but this was deceptive. The river had a current and carried away slowly to the distant sea the various objects that fell into it: a piece of broken mast, an empty barrel, a charred log... As a small boy Gray had often been taken to the river. He particularly liked it here in autumn, when golden and scarlet leaves floated on the water. Obedient to his imagination, they easily became the flotillas of Mark Antony and Octavian. Gray could look painlessly at the

past now. Rivers had played no part in his life with his wife, not this river or any other one. The sea had, and so had lakes, mountains and forests, some streets in the capital and other towns, the asphalted highways, wires, lamps, almost all animals, many birds and fish, books and churches, snow, and particularly trees, in streets, gardens and forests, and also flowers, wild strawberries and hazel-nuts—all these had been banned from his memory. But the things that meant most of all were dogs. He could not see them now without shuddering inwardly. They had loved so many dogs together and lost so many under car wheels, or from distemper and other mysterious and merciless canine diseases. But the river meant nothing. They had not bathed, fished or yachted on it, had not walked along its embankments, dreamed on its bridges or even had any friends who lived in the districts along its banks. The river had managed to avoid all associations! Three cheers for the river!

He savoured this feeling of tranquillity for some time, until he suddenly noticed that slowly but surely anxiety was growing out of this overly conscious calm. You can only be calm while you are not aware of the fact. As soon as you notice it, your calmness goes to the winds.

As a child she had lived by the river and often run down to it with the other girls from the yard. They had fished scraps of thin rubber from balloons out of the littered water by the rotten planks of the old jetty—there was a children's recreation centre upstream, a miniature Disney Land. By breathing hard they had restored a balloon-like shape to the limp flabby rubber, then tied the open end with a piece of thread and tossed it up in the air. Caught by the wind, the balloon would soar up swiftly and glide over to the chimney-stacks of the tobacco factory. There, with a final flash, it would disappear. It was such fun. Then one day a woman who was passing by pulled the piece of rubber which she was blowing up out of her mouth, threw it away in disgust and slapped her face hard.

"Don't you dare put that filthy stuff in your mouth again!"

When the young Benvenuto Cellini saw a salamander in the fire his father smacked his face so that he would always remember this miracle so rarely granted to mortals. But the strange woman's cruelty was out of all proportion to the triviality of the offence, and all that Rena retained was the sharp

pain of undeserved humiliation amid sheer happiness. Gray saw clearly the horror, rage and mortal insult in the child's eyes, round and slightly puffy, with their deep, black, slightly oblong pupils like sunflower seeds. He saw the beautifully sculpted child's head with its firm back, open protruding forehead and delicate crown covered with soft chestnut-coloured hair and saw her rush wildly away from the river, which had become strange and hostile, to her yard at the back of an old church... She may not have cried. She could restrain her tears when she was really hurt and wept easily over trifles or for no reason at all, just through pressure of circumstances.

Something stabbed Gray's left eye or, rather, stabbed his brain through his eye. It was his medal shining through a tear that had welled up and focused the light into a sharp pinpoint, like a lens.

That was the last straw! He often felt his eyes go moist, even in the presence of other people, over trifles which were not necessarily upsetting, but associated in some complex way with his misfortune. It was appalling to lose control of yourself like that. He must pull himself together.

Two schoolgirls in dark dresses and white aprons walked past, looked in amused surprise at the tearful grown-up, then exchanged secret glances and disappeared forever. Gray unscrewed the medal and dropped it into his jacket pocket.

A thin, sad, autumn drone sounded overhead. Looking up Gray saw the bright cross of an aeroplane, like a darn on the blue canvas of the sky. The plane was climbing steeply, almost vertically, and seemed at first not to be moving at all. Its movement could only be detected by the white trail emerging from its tail. Like toothpaste being squeezed out of a tube.

The white path stretched out in the blue, then made a sharp, smooth loop. This was no mere play of natural forces. The aeroplane was deliberately and conscientiously writing a huge letter G over the city. It was an advertisement. And a most eye-catching and effective one in spite of its relatively short life. The plane would not stop until it had scrawled the names of the product it was advertising all over the sky. Then the lines would start dissolving and melting, but anyone who felt like it could make out the blurred letters until it got dark. Gray thought about the pilot sitting in the cockpit. Who was he? A former ace, a fearless fighter-pilot lucky enough to

have been spared by the war, who had dropped his medals into his suitcase and gone off, like the rest of them, to work for a private firm, or a civilian pilot who used to fly huge airliners round the globe until he was sacked for some blunder or because of his age, or a test pilot whose services were no longer needed? In any case he was clearly a man of experience with a tale or two to tell, not some whippersnapper dying to get his hands on the controls or a useless old dodderer. Only a first-class pilot would be allowed to perform aerobatics over the city. He probably disliked messing up the sky with the names of dubious creams, powders, typewriters and fizzy drinks that did not quench your thirst. But maybe he didn't give a damn as long as the money was good?

In the pure defenceless blue the plane wrote his name, then went on to complete the word "GRAYLIN", the brand name with which, in honour of its creator and with his absent-minded consent, they had christened the new patent medicine for treating not corns, perspiration or a cough, but a malady that was the scourge of mankind.

How sickening it was, how absolutely revolting! And how misleading too! Severe cases still required hospitalisation and special treatment, but this advertisement suggested that any form of cancer could be cured with a few pills like stomach-ache.

In the first flush of success Gray had obviously committed quite a lot of blunders. He had agreed to every request, hardly listening to what it was, and light-heartedly signed all sorts of papers which could easily have included his own death warrant for all the attention he paid. But the people who gave him these papers to sign, contracts, agreements and undertakings, were by no means carried away and intoxicated by the universal rejoicing. They knew perfectly well what they were up to. And now he was reaping the fruits of his credulity. They might have left the sky alone, damn them! Why go and mess up that perfect blue!

He hailed a canary-yellow taxi and settled back on the seedy looking seat...

His old Nanny opened the door. Gray seemed to detect a hint of meaningful mockery in the face with its large nose and black moustache. And almost at once he experienced what might be called an "illusion of presence". The dark, gloomy

interior of the flat with its crypt-like odour suddenly acquired a centre of warmth and vitality. He could feel it with his skin, like the heat of a bonfire at night. There was no point in pretending to his Nanny, and he lingered for a moment not because of her, but to conjure up the image of his wife and prepare himself for their meeting. Was she reading in her favourite old leather armchair with the sagging seat, inherited from his parents, under the standard lamp on its curved metal leg, or sleeping with her face buried in the pillow and a moist spot from her mouth on the pillow case, or standing by the window holding a fold in the curtain and staring at the dry summer roofs of the squat houses nearby. No, that was too artificial, and she hated artificiality more than anything in the world. She was as natural as a wild animal, and that was the best thing about her. Perhaps she was drinking coffee out of a small blue cup and heaving short, sharp sighs, because the coffee immediately affected her heart. And when he remembered those short, almost frightened sighs, his heart beat faster and grew all hot and moist. He pushed open the door, strode into the dark dining-room with drawn curtains and went from there into the bedroom, then into his study which reeked of tobacco smoke, and then, half-delirious by now, rushed into the kitchen, flung open the door of Nanny's musty refuge and finally realised that she wasn't there.

"What're you looking for?" came Nanny's masculine voice. "She'll never come back, not her."

That Nanny should have guessed at once why he was rushing round the flat was only to be expected. But why was she giving him such a quizzical look? "Damn the old girl, she's laughing at me! She's always spoilt things for me. Not letting me go for a swim in the river when I was dying to, not allowing me into the forest alone, making me wear rubber boots and warm pullovers in hot, dry weather, complaining when boys came round to see me and almost spitting when she opened the door to my girl-friends. How many times her deliberate spiteful tactlessness has made me blush to the roots, how many rendezvous she has sabotaged, how many friendships she has ruined! Always gloomy, unfriendly and complaining. I used to be afraid to ask her for a cup of tea when my colleagues from work came round. She put up with other visitors, but for some reason she couldn't stand the people from work.

And she was so muddle-headed: she always got everything garbled and confused, asking people to leave a message when they weren't ringing on business, forever chewing or sucking something, consuming vast quantities of tea with jam, chocolate and biscuits all day long and considering herself unappreciated and hard done by. All the meekness of my wife, who took no interest in running the household, could not protect her from that old devil's aggressive and spiteful rebukes. Of course, as soon as anyone fell ill, Nanny would fetch and carry all round the clock without a moment's rest but we were rarely ill. Now and then on hard days, she would show a kind of frenzied devotion, but in the ordinary run of things she was quite intolerable."

He sensed his anger ebbing away and felt ashamed of his spiteful thoughts. Fancy letting fly at a poor old woman who had nothing to call her own and had even lost her femininity.

She kept looking at him like that—in a teasing, meaningful way, ever since he became famous. She took a kind of pathetic pride in adding a touch of irony to her admiration of him. After all think of the times she had changed the sheets for the "Benefactor of Mankind", smacked him on the you know what for all sorts of misdemeanours and washed him in an enamelled bath. He had deceived himself and rained down silent curses on that poor balding grey head with the baseness of the faint-hearted.

"I thought..." he began, then saw that Nanny was leaning over the stove. "I don't want any dinner."

"Then why do I bother to cook dinner?" the old woman sighed.

Gray went into the study and sat down at the large antique desk covered with baize. Its green expanses were cluttered with all sorts of knick-knacks which gave only a very hazy idea of the personality of the owner. There was an ash-tray made from a tortoise with part of its shell cut out and the hole rimmed with copper; a bronze match-box stand, a silver glass-holder full of coloured pencils and ball-point pens which Gray never used (he wrote with an old Parker fountain pen which stained the inside pocket of his jacket with blue ink); three tasteless terracotta statuettes, which he tolerated only because he did not notice them; two small flower vases which had never had any flowers in them; an old Swiss clock that had

stopped a long time ago never to go again; a dagger in a stamped leather sheath; a mosaic-encrusted box containing plastic paper-clips; an oblong piece of glass with a picture of St Mark's Cathedral mysteriously lurking in its glassy depths; a seal which had once belonged to his grandfather on his mother's side, an oculist who died before he was born; a quill presented to him by his colleagues under the illusion that you could write with it; a small bust of La Bruyère of mysterious provenance (every time the bust caught his eye, he resolved to take a look in the encyclopaedia and find out why La Bruyère was famous, but never got round to it; a yellowish lump of quartz, a calendar for the year before, a wooden figurine of a very buxom naked woman of Gauguinesque build and complexion (of all the objects inhabiting the desk only this figurine aroused Gray's affection); a school pencil-box with chewed ends of pencils, worn rubbers and other bits of rubbish; a postcard of Majorca and a broken desk lamp. Gray had no idea where most of these objects came from. They had appeared gradually and imperceptibly, as if wafting down one by one through the smoke-laden air. "I must throw them out," he thought for some reason. "Things are alright if they reflect the character of their owner or remind you of something, but otherwise what's the point of having them?"

Not a single thing of his wife's remained. She had arrived there with practically nothing and departed likewise. An undomesticated person, she was not attached to the material things of this world. She could take pleasure in a bright piece of cloth or a musical box and remain totally indifferent to something really valuable. The world of objects left her indifferent, on the whole, and if it did touch her this was only through complex associations. In this case the object would disclose itself to her as a symbol, and then she showed a ruthless childlike avidity. When she left, the only thing she took with her, apart from a few dresses, a raincoat and some underwear, was an old sunshade with a broken handle. Even in mild sunshine her face got covered with freckles instantly, so a sunshade was essential to her. That was the way she did things, quite naturally, without any posturing or affectation. She had not thought that this little touch of prudence would somehow degrade their parting. She did not leave a note, just said to Nanny, "Tell Gray I'm not coming back any more," and

off she went. Where? He did not know. He thought she had rented a room somewhere. She hadn't left him for another man, she had just left him. A man would probably turn up sooner or later, perhaps one already had. She couldn't live alone, and how could she support herself anyway? Her strange painting didn't earn her a penny, and she would never take money from Gray. That didn't mean she would not accept help from someone else. Her moral code was something Gray did not quite understand. Perhaps there was nothing much in it to understand anyway. She was governed not by rules, not by principles and laws, but by instinct, intuition—if she didn't like the sound of something, she would steer clear of it fastidiously, whereas things that didn't sound too good at all to other people did not offend her sensitive ear. That's the way it was.

But why had she left him? Gray thought about this a great deal or, to be more precise, he thought about it all the time. When he stopped thinking about it consciously, his heart went on for him. There had been no grounds whatever for the rupture, but there must be a reason, of course. Perhaps they had lived together for too long without being unhappy, but also without any intense joy and she had got tired of the monotony? It looked as if she'd had enough of the way they lived. Gray worked a great deal and paid little attention to her, but that was how it had been ever since the beginning of their life together, and she hadn't minded it then. Only when he had just fallen in love did Gray give up work completely and lead the life of a bemused layabout carelessly squandering time. When they were not together, he wandered round the streets or lounged in cafes over a glass of brandy, staring with unseeing eyes at the customers and counting the hours and minutes to a telephone call or meeting. Her day was full. She was studying at art school, and apart from that there were some "boys", fellow-students deeply and platonically in love with her, who required extreme tact. She was forever putting off meetings with him so as not to upset the "boys". He admired this loyalty to her friends, although he didn't know what to do with himself during these last suppers to which others were invited, but not him. But then the "boys" somehow drifted away. Gray thought they must have started saying nasty things about him and Rena had decided to sacrifice these romantic friendships.

At that time he saw himself as the prodigal son returned to hearth and home. He had completely forgotten the city in which he was born and grew up. He was aware, of course, that changes were taking place there: new houses and whole districts were going up as old dilapidated buildings were demolished, there were new squares and monuments, subways and underpasses, but he had not realised the changes were so great. His whole life was limited to the laboratory, the clinic and home. Early on, while still at medical school, he had set himself a goal (or rather the goal had found him, because the choice was not an act of will, he had suddenly discovered that the choice had been made), and all the trivial, distracting things that prevent a person from getting on with his job disappeared of their own accord: get-togethers and binges with the boys, drifting around the streets at night, films, concerts, theatres, restaurants, holiday resorts and that parody of a sport so beloved by scientists—the diligent hitting of a tennis ball to and fro on a court of reddish gravel. Once having embarked on independent research, he stopped taking leave and spent the stuffy summers in the deserted air-polluted city—for some reason his brain seemed to work particularly well then. Only once was this strict regime interrupted, when he was put in charge of a field hospital during the war. But he got wounded shortly afterwards, and returned to his old routine: the laboratory, the clinic and home.

Yet he was by no means a robot programmed to perform certain limited tasks. He read a great deal and avidly, listened to music at home and sometimes felt a sudden need for Botticelli or Rembrandt, Van Gogh or Derain and rushed off to the museum for sustenance which kept him going for a long time. Women visited him, and he drank wine with them. A lot of wine to make his tired brain switch off. And the women almost invariably fell in love with him, because he was a strong and lively person. His coolness and reserve combined with an outward sociability made them want to get close to him. Remembering Hemingway's words that having a woman in the morning would cost you at least one page of good prose (roughly equivalent to one good idea), he set aside only the evening hours for love, which by no means cooled the ardour of his lady-friends. One of them managed to hang around for

so long that he was on the verge of proposing. But then Rena appeared, and the woman immediately understood and withdrew without a word. She was a good, intelligent and pleasant woman. With her he could have lived a peaceful, tidy, decent life to the end of his days. A real scientist's wife, as people in their circle would say...

But then Rena came, and his orderly self-created life was turned upside down. White trees heavy with snow appeared, or glassy streets ringing delicately, unexpected new houses, and empty or packed cafes where girls with long noses drank coffee and cognac. Once he found himself in the street of his childhood, which still looked quiet and provincial: three- and four-storeyed blocks of rented apartments, grey detached houses with dusty windows that were never opened, big oak trees in the yards, cast-iron posts by the gates, the uneven, narrow pavements (if you managed to walk on all the paving stones without stepping on the joins the teacher wouldn't call you up to the blackboard that day). He was disturbed by small discoveries: a bookshop he had forgotten or never seen before, a newspaper kiosk, a bar, a summer cafe with a red-striped marquee, subways where he always got lost, emerging at the point where he had gone in. With the town memories of childhood and youth returned and something new emerged, like the promise of happiness. The town also heralded Rena, for every time he had his fill of brandy or light ale, streets and alleys, old churches and new hotels, he got Rena. No matter how busy she was, she never disappointed his expectations, after the "boys" had disappeared, of course. Sometimes he felt she was destroying some important trifles in her own life: an exam, a drawing lesson, a visit to the studio of some famous *maitre* or newly emerged genius, a meeting with a girlfriend, a dress fitting, a students' ball, but she never let him feel there was anything sacrificial about her behaviour, and did not regard it as a sacrifice herself. As for Gray himself, he had almost given up working completely. Long afterwards he felt it was precisely at this time of love and idleness that he hit on the right path, the path that led him to the discovery. Forced out of his usual routine, he acquired freedom, and subconsciously reassessed his values. He stopped dogging other people's so-called successes, stopped regarding them as milestones on the way to truth, and with a

regal nonchalance set off in the opposite direction, throwing years of hard, painstaking work down the drain, blotted out the past with a strange carelessness that saved him from despair, and in so doing, unbeknown to himself, laid the foundation of his future triumph...

Actually she was not involved in all this. She took no interest in his work. For a long time she didn't even seem to know what his job was. Something to do with medicine... Gray was touched by her indifference. What attracted her about him was the person, not what earned him his salary and gave him status in life. But there was something not quite right about this. It is possible that Rena had a sufficiently high opinion of him not to attach any importance to his academic standing, but apart from titles and degrees, for what they're worth, there was still the work itself, the quest, which deserved attention even from someone not interested in science. After all the whole of present-day mankind lives in the tropic of cancer. But she was interested only in the arts. The innate feeling for colour which he possessed by some accident of fate impressed her far more than his academic achievements, still somewhat relative at that time. However you look at it, there was a strange, incomprehensible arrogance in her indifference to his life's work. Arrogance and narrowness. And ignorance too. The cultural layer of her heart was very thin. Immersed in her art, she was not at all well-read, and he had to introduce her not only to Proust, Joyce and Robert Musil, but also Stendhal, Dostoyevsky, Hamsun and even Dickens. She knew the present, but had hardly any knowledge of the past. Was she talented? Yes, she had some talent, but that was all: no industry, no perseverance, no capacity to finish what she was doing, no conscious attitude towards her work. Which was shy she never achieved anything, remaining a semi-dilettante. But what did he care about all those trivial details, when she came to him at last! Indifferent to his concerns and reflections, she took an intense and tender interest in all the changes in his appearance. When they first met on that rich and magical winter evening,—an early and unexpected fall of snow had covered the road and pavements with a fluffy blanket, robing every twig, every scroll on the iron railings in the public gardens, placing glittering caps on the streetlamps and posts, and bejeweling the collar of his fur coat and his expens-

ive fur hat,—she kept hopping up and down, clapping her hands and moaning delightedly:

"Oh, how marvellous! What an evening, and you're so incredibly handsome!"

She went on repeating this tirelessly and hopping, until she slipped and fell down. Her fall was not clumsy, but sweet and gentle, like a sign of trust in the snow covering the asphalt. Before he had time to help her, she jumped up, started clapping and fell down again, and when this happened a fourth or fifth time, she suddenly resented the perfidy of the hidden slipperiness, her dark pupils grew helplessly and angrily dilated and a small tear appeared in the corner of both eyes, by the slightly flattened bridge of her nose. He had laughed and tried to console her for being unlucky, but now there was nothing for him to laugh at. Dickens and Joyce and the rest of them didn't count for anything compared with that pure manifestation of trusting life. That was where her charm lay. Whereas another woman would have simply fallen down, laddering her stocking, bruising her knee and upsetting herself and everyone else, she had quite unconsciously and unintentionally created a sweet, moving circus act with a depth of emotion not to be found in any circus performance.

Alright, alright. So, there wasn't a single object on the desk capable of reminding him of her. It was all useless junk that deserved to be thrown down the refuse chute. But that required effort, and the junk was not worth it. Damn it! There was nothing for him to do at the desk. He would continue his labour of pain and anguish in bed.

He stood under the shower, not bothering to even soap himself, dried himself absent-mindedly with the soft towel, then went into the bedroom and pulled the blind, trying not to look out of the window at the intolerable word "Graylin" which kept flaring up and glittering shamelessly in mincing emerald, golden and scarlet dots, creating together with other loud paeans of praise for elastic bandages, cigarettes, ale and tyre covers the city's unattractive night tableau.

He wondered what Rena thought about his name appearing all over the place. Perhaps she found this persistence insulting, as if he were deliberately and tactlessly reminding her of him, or perhaps she couldn't care less. Most likely, given her vagueness and blindness to things around her, it had

never occurred to her that an advertisement for yet another dubious product had anything to do with him at all. How strange, unexpected, unfair and disgusting it was, that his noble discovery had fallen into such unscrupulous hands.

He lay down on the bed, put out the lamp and found himself staring into the smooth face of insomnia. Insomnia had never presented him with a single useful idea. He had never taken a single decision as he tossed about in the first revoltingly cold, then revoltingly hot sheets. All the useful, valuable ideas he had conceived, worked out or hit upon had appeared in the clear light of day. Insomnia stirred lots of bits and pieces of ideas in his brain that never came together to form a proper thought, a host of useless trivial memories, blurred images disturbing in their lack of clarity and tiny horrors of interest only to provincial Freud-lovers. Insomnia had given him the most unproductive hours of his waking life. Rena's departure had changed nothing. Insomnia debased even his suffering which, in crumpled sheets under a stuffy blanket, was changed into smaller coin; in daytime an eagle tore at his heart, now a swarm of mosquitoes bit him.

Insomnia made Rena's departure seem easier to explain. She had just got bored. She couldn't work, while he was busier than ever. Probably she had been irritated by the contrast between her tiresome freedom and his absorption. And she had simply got bored with him. There had been little joy in their life in recent years. She had been unfaithful to him, his insomnia left him in no doubt about that, and had been angry with herself for doing so; basically, she was a proud, straightforward person. Her own infidelity humiliated her, but she blamed him for this humiliation. In general, she held him responsible for everything that happened to her. That was touching, of course, but hardly fair. If she had murdered someone, she would quite genuinely have believed that he was the murderer, not she. There was something childlike, yet at the same time corrupt in this total disclaiming of all responsibility. He was to blame for the fact that she had got bored with him, that their life had gone stale, that she couldn't draw or paint, that these simple diversions with people of no importance had become more attractive than married life. Nothing in particular had drawn her away, but at home everything irritated and repelled her: old Nanny with her constant com-

plaining, the need to fit into a set routine, his work, the telephone calls, the old cat who by some strange coincidence disappeared the day she left, the viviparous fish in the aquarium with threads of excrement trailing behind them, minute, greedy, demanding creatures constantly in need of food and fresh water; the arrival of the postman with newspapers, letters, invitations and bills—the latter needing to be paid—and everything else that went to make up the day. There were only two solutions: the first was dubious, namely, to change absolutely everything, to redecorate and replan the flat, buy new furniture, throw out the fish, kill the cat and Nanny, and make him accept the fact that in the evenings she must have "people" around who liked cheap music and expensive drinks, in other words, to acquire complete freedom or, which was more reliable and easier, to leave. She had chosen the latter.

She had known that he was close to success, but this had not stopped her. On the contrary, it had hastened her departure. This was an indication of her innate good taste. To leave at the height of his triumph would have looked deliberate, melodramatic and insincere, and would have aroused too much sympathy from those around for him and for her. Besides, it wasn't right to clout a man in his moment of joy. So he could think himself lucky to have been abandoned so sensitively, with such tact, faith in him, kindness and unselfishness. She had taken nothing with her apart from a few dresses and the old sunshade with the broken handle. As he tossed miserably unable to sleep nothing made the usual moving impression on him. He twitched his skin like a dog and turned over onto his left side to lie on his heart. Perhaps that would calm and comfort it.

All the same, it had been horrid and cruel, monstrously cruel of her to leave. She had been thinking only of herself: if she had shown the slightest concern for him in her action, it was only because of a certain coincidence of interests. She was not a spiteful person, but she was cruel. Long-term, constant emotions were not her cup of tea. Instantaneous surrender followed by icy cold, that was Rena. And no ability at all to control herself or her feelings. In some respects that was marvellous, as all genuine emotion is marvellous, but it was also most destructive for human relationships, because they are more than just a firework display, more than a holiday.

There have to be workdays as well. It was the workdays that had got her down. But she had been sincere at every individual moment...

Next morning he was woken by the sun blazing into his eyes. It was past nine. He experienced an instant of pure physiological delight from the sun, the blue sky and his reawakening. Then his body was flooded with the now familiar weakness, the ailing, limp feeling, which he had previously experienced only after heavy drinking. So old age was like a hangover. He would have to start all over again. Last night had changed nothing. And what could it have changed anyway?

As he got dressed, he saw that he was going to be late for the usual meeting of windbags. "Never mind, they can wait," he thought indifferently.

For three hours he sat through the meeting without hearing a word. He had recently discovered in himself the ability to become deaf at will. He sat there, head clasped in his hands, scrutinising the impressive superfluity of the scholarly faces around him with their sclerotic bare temples, sunken mouths and scrawny dead skin, eyes that were still greedy and glittered avidly at the sight of Success. And that magical, unbelievable Success was him, Gray, the unhappiest man in the world.

The people present had no connection at all with Rena, which made them seem incredibly empty to Gray. He declined an invitation to take the floor and this, strangely enough, created a good impression. Those around him accepted his behaviour, for it seemed sincere, natural and even astonishingly frank. Yet it was depression that had kept him from addressing them.

But his refusal made perhaps an even more favourable impression on a burly, dark-skinned man with greying hair in a dark tweed suit whom Gray vaguely took to be a civil servant.

"Yes, indeed, 'Speech is silver, but silence is golden'!" the man declared happily, showing the delicately pink gums of his new denture.

He also said something about Graylin and about money, of course, because as soon as he opened his splendid artificial mouth you could hear the clink of shekels. Stunned by the sudden discovery that he too, like his academic colleagues, was quite superfluous at the meeting, Gray did not listen to

him. The handsome dark-skinned man with greying hair was needed. And all the scholarly frills were only to provide some impressive small print on the new packet of Graylin or a piece of advertising copy.

Gray had never stopped to wonder whose money he and hundreds of other scientists had been throwing to the wind all these years. The important thing was that it was there... But the people who had provided the money were not so unconcerned about it and kept strict count. Now the time had come to pay back with interest, incredibly high interest, everything that had been spent. And the vast, carefully regulated machine for profit-making had gone into operation. All that was required of Gray now was not to get in the way...

After the meeting Gray set off for the clinic. There was actually nothing for him to do there, but he had to occupy himself somehow. On the way he twice thought he saw Rena. The first time he clutched the driver's arm and made him stop where the traffic regulations did not permit it, but the woman was not Rena after all, although she looked very like her: the chestnut hair with a glint of red, the beautifully sallow smooth skin, as in old portraits, the narrowish slit of the slightly puffy eyes and somewhat flattened nose, made this young woman, like Rena, resemble a Korean girl. And she had almost the same perfectly shaped head, with an exquisite nape and a high forehead slightly hollowed at the temples. Yet compared with Rena this passing woman was like flat champagne. How strange that in spite of an almost identical appearance they were two quite different people. No, the champagne was not flat. They had just forgotten to add the sparkle.

The second woman was also remarkably like Rena. At least she seemed to be in that fleeting glimpse. But Gray suddenly felt embarrassed, and the woman disappeared into the crowd. Perhaps it really had been Rena.

Gray's heart was beating somewhere down in his stomach, and his thorax was as empty as a bird cage on Feathered Friends' Day. It was some time before everything returned to its right place again. He wasn't ready for a meeting with Rena, and such a meeting might take place at any moment. They were both living in the old town, where people were constantly bumping into one another...

By the entrance to the clinic a woman rushed up to him,

and before he had time to stop her, seized his hand and kissed it. Tears were pouring down her no longer young dark-skinned face with large pores and bags under the eyes that signalled kidney disease. Between the sobs she told him that he had saved her son's life. The woman's breath smelt strongly of acetone—diabetes. But she was oblivious to her own ailments. The only thing that mattered was that her son would get better, her darling Wood, who had come to the clinic with advanced cancer of the pancreas. He was so young and so talented, he should live and live, but he... "He what?" Gray interrupted her. "He will live!" "Unlike you," he almost added. Gray had a good memory for his patients. He immediately conjured up a picture of Wood, a gloomy pimply lad whom he had put on his feet before the boy realised how ill he was.

Gray's appearance in the yard of the clinic had been noticed by the staff, and the doctors, orderlies and nurses rushed onto the porch. They gave him a round of applause. Someone had thought up this idiotic ritual, and now whenever he appeared in the clinic there was an ovation straightaway. This habit of the hospital staff, so out of keeping with his present state of mind, irritated Gray. He was about to stop them with a curt gesture, when he felt a rush of warmth that made him relent. What was the reason? Gray looked around at the people in white coats and caps and his eyes rested on the young inexpressive and sleepy-looking face of one of his numerous assistants. What was his name? He remembered faces well, but not names, although he never forgot the names of his talented assistants. Evidently this young man was not one of their number. Gray looked again at the pallid face, the greying straggly hair, the watery, sleepy eyes, and the warm feeling grew stronger and more distinct, as if his heart was being wrapped in soft marten fur.

"How's your thesis getting on, old chap?" asked Gray, striding over to the young man.

The assistant started and wiped the smile off his face as if someone had switched him off.

"But you rejected my subject, Professor!"

Gray immediately remembered the man's boring subject and dull ideas, but strangely enough the subject did not seem such a hopeless one to him now.

"You misunderstood me!" he said brightly. "The subject only appears to be unpromising, but in fact it's full of possibilities. Come and see me, and we'll talk it over."

With a friendly nod Gray went into the clinic. The other research workers looked with envy and respect at the sleepy lad, who for no apparent reason had been favoured with a mark of Divine grace and whose temples suddenly ached as if someone had placed a tin halo on them.

Gray walked along the corridor, past the tall windowless doors leading into the wards. "Not so long ago we just pretended to treat cancer," he thought. "When at best we could delay death by a few months, perhaps even years, but hardly ever cured anyone completely. We could relieve the pain to some extent, of course, cheer people up and give them hope, help them to face the next world with a smile—that's also something. We were more like monks than doctors, comforters rather than curers, but a low grade of monk: the hand servants of the Lord promise eternal bliss in heaven, not a return to the vale of tears as we did .. "

Gray pushed open a small door leading not to a ward but to a tiny room inhabited by an old woman, the first patient to be cured by the miraculous new method. This eighty-year-old, wrinkled lonely old woman had come to the clinic with a cancer-riddled liver. The metastases had woven a spider-web in her intestines. She was brought there by some kind neighbours who lived on the same landing.

As usual, the old girl was devouring something from a plastic clinic bowl. She shot Gray a brief glance with her white lifeless eyes and went on eating.

"How do you feel?" asked Gray.

Something akin to cunning flashed in the old woman's white eyes.

"Fit as a fiddle... But you promised to bring me something..." she mumbled, bits of food dribbling out of her mouth.

This poor creature, picked clean by old age and illness, whose heart had long been wrapped in oblivion, was uncannily perceptive. For example, she realised that saving her life had been a colossal stroke of good fortune for Gray personally, and each time she reminded him that he was in her debt and demanded some kind of reward. She made him bring her

toffees, to which she was very partial, and would grip one in her toothless jaws, then pull it out in a long golden thread.

"Any complaints?"

"Why should I complain?" the old woman mumbled. "I'm going away from here."

"Why is that?" Gray asked, taken aback.

The old woman put down the bowl. The lifeless white eyes lit up with awareness and looked at Gray with something approaching triumph.

"'Cause I am! I'm moving to a private clinic!"

Gray made a mental note of the intense dislike which the poor invariably felt for free medical treatment. Perhaps it was humiliating to have your flesh healed without paying, as a kind of favour, when other people were spending a fortune on it. And only then did he register what the old woman had said.

"Come into a bit of money, have you?"

But the old woman was not joking. She had been visited by a representative of the firm manufacturing Graylin. From now onwards her highly embellished portrait would adorn the packet with the drug. She would get a little something for that, of course...

How about that! Those businessmen always got down to the nitty-gritty. It was no accident that the newspapers had announced: "They make history—the doctor and his patient!" There was a ludicrous truth in this. People remembered the old woman's name better than his. As if they really did believe that she had actually *helped* Gray to save her life. Through her ordinary mortals could take part, as it were, in the Discovery of the Century. Gray took a kind of perverse pleasure in the self-deception of the crowd. Let him win immortality together with this old woman, like Dante and Beatrice or Petrarch and Laura. But now things had really got going: the firms had guessed rightly that the cured woman was far more valuable to them than the curer. For she was the guarantee of success. And just as the Giaconda had adorned perfume, so the old woman would appear on Graylin. So move over, Gray, and don't get in the way.

In an effort to stifle the laughter rising in his chest, he tensed his throat and the veins on his temples bulged. Feeling unable to hold it back, Gray went quickly into the corridor.

Dear God, his only salvation from this phantasmagoria was Rena, and she had gone!

He wiped his eyes with handkerchief. Patients were mooching about in the corridor. Many of them had already recovered, and others soon would. He had saved them, but who would save him? They had all applauded Bombard, but how easily the admiring world had condemned him to solitude and despair. And all those ex-champions, favourites of the crowd, who end up losing all their money, committing suicide or risking some daredevil fatal trick, so as not to sink down with the dregs! Yes, people are merciless to their idols of yesterday. They worship you as long as you can still produce something new and sensational... People don't know how to help one another and don't try to learn, which explains why a person in trouble is so incredibly alone... Gray had again returned to his own troubles and, realising it, he decided that misfortune must be immoral because it leads to alienation and misanthropy.

Alongside these bitter thoughts (and recently all his thoughts had a bitter or sour taste) a feeling of warmth, almost joy, arose inside him. Gray trusted this joy. It could not be deceptive, yet he was disturbed at being unable to detect its origin. He thought back over the events of the day, but everything he remembered produced only a pang of alienation. Then he glimpsed a sleepy, expressionless face with a somewhat vague grimace of lips pursed in a half-smile, and the joy inside Gray became assured. Ah, that's it, the assistant, what was his name? He had thought of an interesting subject, obviously a talented lad. Why hadn't Gray noticed him before? How little attention we pay to those around us, especially quiet, unobtrusive people with a nugget of gold deep down inside them. He should have noticed his smile at least. What a marvellous smile it was! Not attractive, for he had fat, sluggish lips and a row of uneven yellowish teeth, but a man who smiled like that could not be bad or mediocre. He really ought to go and see that nice assistant, dammit, and help him with his difficult and bold decision. Even if the subject he had chosen did lead to a dead end, surely *the two of them* could get an M.Sc. out of it somehow? And sometimes the search is more useful than the actual find. Gray felt a kind of savage determination. He would help the assistant, help his wonderful, nice and rather pathetic smile.

After getting the talented young man's address from the general office, he set off to visit him on the other side of the town.

The arrival of the "Benefactor of Mankind" threw the assistant into a state of complete confusion which practically incapacitated him. He forgot to invite Gray into the living-room and for a long time they stood aimlessly in the hall, then he forgot to introduce his wife, a well-built, plump, bad-tempered-looking blonde, who did not recognise the great man at first, and then lapsed into silent fury at her husband's clumsy behaviour. And his behaviour was indeed extraordinarily clumsy: he just couldn't smile, couldn't perform the small act for the sake of which Gray, fate personified, had come to see him. The skin on the assistant's startled, goggle-eyed face had gone so hard and held the cracked lips so tightly that with the best will in the world he simply could not smile, like a woman caked in an egg or paraffin beauty mask, nor did he feel the slightest inclination to smile.

But Gray was waiting. "You're an intelligent, gifted person," he was saying. "Don't be so shy, old chap. A bit more self-confidence, a bit more push, and you'll never look back, dammit." But the same lifeless mask still stared back at him.

The wife tried to make up for her husband's obtuse lack of courtesy. Suppressing the anger that was boiling up in her with the urge to tear her thickheaded spouse to pieces, she enveloped Gray in a mass of affectionate gestures and cooings. And you should have seen her smile! It was tender, admiring, enticing, almost indecent! But after a white ivory glimpse of the even teeth between the full, crimson lips, Gray did not look in her direction any more. He needed a different smile.

"Cheer up!" Gray made one last attempt to shake him out of it. "With a supervisor like me you'll be alright! Come and see me in my office first thing tomorrow morning."

Only then did the assistant finally dare to believe that this was not just a seductive dream and that an all-powerful hand was already holding him firmly by the scruff of the neck to protect him against adversity. The flaccid, unsightly lips quivered and parted, revealing yellow incisors.

"Goodbye!" Gray shouted, feeling tears of happiness, affection and sorrow well up inside him. "See you tomorrow, my dear fellow!" And he hurried out of the flat.

"Well, how about that?" the assistant said to his wife.

She stood there, looking down thoughtfully. She was not angry with her husband any more, realising unconsciously that he had somehow managed to do what was expected of him.

"See," the assistant continued, mildly on the offensive. "Not everyone thinks I'm no good."

"Rubbish!" said his wife abruptly. "Surely you don't think he was won over by your genius? He can see right through you. It's something else, but what I can't for the life of me think..."

Gray carried the assistant's smile away with him. He kept relishing it in different ways, like a tear from an eyelash, blinking it away, savouring the light, almost inexplicable joy. Then, without resisting, he would let it emerge again—the weak grimace of those thick ugly lips. In the end the smile left an invisible trail behind it, and the trail led to a lake, a large oval lake gleaming brightly in the rays of the setting sun.

The bank on this side was covered with willows but the opposite one was bare and hilly, almost eery hill being topped with an old deserted monastery. At one time this had been the religious centre of the country. A big thundercloud without sharp contours had been looming in the east for some time. It was rising slowly above the horizon, a little darker and duller than the pale blue sky, merging with it higher up, so that sometimes there seemed to be no cloud at all, just the smoky breath of earth petrified in the air. But no, it was a cloud, of course, carrying not just rain, but a storm, a flood, the end of the world—one look at it made you shiver. The surrounding countryside sensed the approach of something menacing: the birds flew low, zigzagging about, the crows and gulls squawking as loud as they could; far behind in the low-lying sultry plain lapwings were sobbing, and the fish were biting wildly, almost on a bare hook.

Apart from the thundercloud some smaller grey clouds were drifting over the bank, draping the domes of the monastery churches with long beards of rain. But on this side there was sun, light and some curly lamb's-wool clouds.

The changed glitter of the lake heralded what was to come. The playful gold ripple gave way to bands of dull silver which spread over the hushed water. The birds grew silent and scattered. It became empty over the lake. Then, without a word,

they dug the fishing rod into the ground and went into the pine grove that lay between the lake and the highway. Their new friend, a dedicated fisherman, called out reproachfully:

"Don't go off now, they'll start biting like mad!"

He got no answer. They sank down on the ground at the foot of a tall pine tree on a soft blanket of old dead needles and began kissing. They said no words of endearment and had no need of such empty chatter. Then there was a silent frenzied sinking into each other, and anything that got in the way was discarded. They did not notice getting naked and did not remember the forest path that ran nearby. But God spares drunkards and lovers. They did not loosen their embrace even when the storm that had been brewing all day broke at last. The crown of the pine tree could not hold off the downpour for long, and cold streams of rain soon lashed their unprotected bodies. It grew dark in the forest, lightning stitched the darkness in short, sharp flashes or ploughed the forest with bursts of pale blue light, then came the thunder, the universe collapsed, and the eruption of water mounted, as if the lake had risen from its banks and descended on the forest in all its hugeness. And they went to sleep, united, beneath the storm.

They slept for a long time. The storm spent itself, and all that remained of it was a faint patter of rain and some faint distant flashes. The light now was bright and clear, and by their cheeks cold bilberry bushes quivered from the drops of icy rain running down them like little darting animals.

They woke up, but lay exhausted for a long time, unable to pull on their clothes and return to everyday life, to their friend the fisherman, the rods and jars of mosquito grubs. And still no one came along the path. Only when they eventually got dressed and he was trying with clumsy damp fingers to do up a slippery button on the back of her dress did an old fisherman stomp past them in his rubber boots, the hem of his heavy raincoat almost touching them.

Cold and still wet, they did not know where to go later when the fishing was over. They were sick to death of their friend the fisherman with his stubborn indifference to everything but fishing. They couldn't go to her place, because some relatives had arrived from the provinces, and the spiteful discomfort of Nanny made his place out of the question. Then she remembered an older girlfriend of hers, who was a good

sort and not easily embarrassed. She would look after them, give them hot tea with raspberry jam, and go to spend the night with her grown-up daughters. So they set off there. The door was opened by a shortish plump woman with grey hair and black whiskers even thicker than Nanny's, not pretty, but you could see at once that she was kind and straightforward. She stretched out a short firm hand to Gray and her full mouth smiled, showing dark tobacco-stained teeth; and many years later her smile turned into a thesis for the unsuccessful assistant.

Having realised why he felt drawn to the assistant, Gray did not change his mind about helping him. This amortised reminder of Rena, of the best time they had spent together, brought him no suffering, only joy tinged with sadness. It would have been painful to meet Rena's older friend, but the assistant's smile acted like the tiny dose of poison which cures, rather than kills. Increased, however, this dose would become fatal...

...That first embrace, in the storm, invariably made up for all the unpleasantness that Rena brought into their relationship later. "Could any other woman have been so trusting and shameless with me, so selfless and extravagantly intimate?" he would ask himself and immediately reply: "No!" Then one day, when this "no!" had just resounded inside him with its customary delight, he suddenly thought coldly and soberly: "But why not?" It could have been another woman, and not a particularly proper one at that. Women are far more impulsive and incautious than men. Few men in his place would have dared to risk such an openly pagan act. They would be too shy, too afraid of the responsibility, the gossip. Yet a lot of women would follow anyone who chose to call them. But the shamelessness of the adventure-seeker has nothing in common with the pure surrender of the person who senses the weight of the stars and the secret movements of the world. He was wrong to try and cast doubt on the finest experience of his life. That was not the answer. It was not worth trying to save himself in that way, by denigrating the past. That form of self-defence was for base and worthless hearts...

Paul Homburg arrived, the Nobel prize winner, a great and once famous physicist, later totally forgotten, after whom one of the quantum effects had been called.

Engrossed as he was in his personal unhappiness, Gray had been looking forward to this meeting with excitement and curiosity. For his generation Homburg was the Einstein of experimental physics. But after the sensational renown of the thirties his name disappeared, as was the case with many scientists working in the field of atomic physics. Shortly after the end of the war it suddenly floated up to the surface again in connection with some scandal, but then finally sank into oblivion. Gray had thought that Homburg must have given up the ghost long ago in his silent solitude. But no, he was still alive and even an object of some public interest. His visit to see Gray was the subject of lively discussion in the press.

Gray was surprised that Homburg looked so old, for he was not even seventy. The frail old man who emerged from the railway carriage had long wispy white hair almost down to his shoulders, that was lifted by the lightest gust of wind, a long drooping moustache too big for his wrinkled face, and dark weeping eyes. He looked extraordinarily like a sick old rabbit. His upper lip with the moustache kept twitching, and his chin jerked in time with it. He was determined to embrace Gray, and the latter was so embarrassed that he hugged him too abruptly lifting the light, almost empty body right off the ground.

"Hello, my friend," said Homburg in a quiet, but very clear and pure voice. "Hello, my dear fellow!"

"Where is your wife?" Gray asked, having been told that Homburg was bound to come with his wife, without whom he would never go anywhere.

The upper lip with the white floppy moustache quivered.

"She has something wrong with her stomach," Homburg said wretchedly. "Something very wrong!" The dark eyes welled with tears.

"Not cancer, I hope?"

"My dear chap, after your discovery you should say: 'I hope it is cancer.' God grant that it's cancer, and not an ulcer or gastritis which is even worse. They're brilliant at operating on ulcers now."

"Forgive me," said Gray, embarrassed. "I sometimes have strange lapses of memory these days."

The dark damp eyes gave him a look of alert compassion.

"Anything wrong, old chap?"

"My wife's left me," Gray said with what was for him unaccustomed frankness, suddenly realising he liked Paul Homburg very much.

The latter stretched out a narrow, mottled hand with transparent blue joints, took hold of Gray's wrist, held it for a while, then let go. He hadn't the strength to shake hands.

Homburg refused to give an interview to the press. Gray did likewise. They drove to Gray's flat, where they were to breakfast together.

"It's strange," Gray said to his companion who was huddled up in a corner of the car. "I've never seen a photograph of you, but your face seems extremely familiar to me."

"There's nothing strange about that. You've probably seen pictures of Einstein."

"Yes, of course," Gray exclaimed. "What a likeness!"

"It's not that surprising really," Homburg smiled. "Once, when I was ill, I didn't shave or have a hair-cut for a long time. And when I looked in the mirror, I saw my old teacher. A moustache and long hair change a person's appearance considerably. Einstein had quite different eyes, nose and mouth. He didn't twitch and was much bigger than me, but that doesn't matter. The important thing is the main outline. And I have preserved Einstein's mask. It's adolescent, I know, but I love him dearly. Sometimes I sit in front of the mirror and talk to myself, as if I were him. We've got plenty to talk about!" Paul Homburg laughed.

Gray felt one could behave quite simply and frankly with this man, without fear of appearing tactless. And he asked Homburg what had happened to him just after the war.

"Oh, my goodness!" Homburg exclaimed. "I thought everyone was fed up with that ancient story of mine. But scholars in different fields are cut off from one another by an impenetrable wall. And you natural scientists don't read the papers. There was nothing unusual about it. I sweated away in my laboratory, believing that I was helping to create a weapon against Nazism, but not against black-haired children in Hiroshima. A scientist working in my field must be able to combine political naiveté with moral irresponsibility. I violated the rule of good taste, by permitting myself to have my own opinion. What's more, I expressed this opinion pretty forcefully. Most

people think I was let off rather lightly: instead of being charged with treason, I was just wiped off the slate of life. They took away everything: the laboratory, the fruits of my research, even my name. Who has heard of Homburg today? But they allowed me to earn my living. I taught at a college. And recently they have even started inviting me to scientific meetings. I haven't kept up with modern science and don't know the jargon, but I go all the same. Strange though it may seem, I still find life interesting. Even like this... And now I've come all this way to see you."

At this point his tone changed, becoming more serious, and he delivered a speech specially prepared for Gray about how lucky a scientist was whose discovery brought people nothing but good and could not be used for evil purposes.

"Thank you. Although I'm no longer absolutely sure that I have made mankind happy."

Homburg looked at him in amazement.

"You see, my drug will always be in the hands of the rich and powerful and increase their power over ordinary people."

"How unhappy you must be, dear colleague, if you are already troubled by such thoughts! In your place I should prefer to comfort myself with illusions."

"I am unhappy," Gray admitted. "Tell me, strictly between ourselves. Does He really exist?" He pointed a finger up to the sky.

Homburg screwed up his eyes cunningly.

"I'm absolutely sure of it. Otherwise everything would be meaningless. It's better to think that our planet is an unsuccessful experiment by an inquisitive old man."

"Old man? So you believe in..."

"In the most primitive children's god with a long beard and a round halo."

"So there's no Supreme Reason or Original Postulate?"

Homburg waved his small mottled hands. His upper lip quivered like that of a rabbit who has been given a ball of paper instead of a cabbage leaf.

"No, no, no! What's the use of all that rubbish? An old man with a long beard and blue eyes. A German. I bet he's a German. That would explain his penchant for world cataclysms, comets, solar prominences, galactic explosions and the steady expansion of the universe."

"But could an old man like that be all-mighty?" Gray asked seriously.

"My dear chap, everything in the world is relative. Of course, he can do something... But you know what the catch is? He poses the riddles, and we have to guess the answers. Do you think he knew Einstein's formula? Of course not. He's playing dice: whatever he throws, we get. He didn't object to cancer when it came up, but I'm certain that before your discovery he didn't have the faintest idea how to cure it."

"Is there any point in praying then?"

"It's hard to say. I'm a special case. I disappointed his expectations, albeit unintentionally, and didn't do my homework, so I'm in his bad books. For this reason I haven't asked him for anything important for some time. Only for simple everyday things, to do with the house or the weather... But you're in a different position. Have a go, it can't do any harm."

For the rest of the day they looked at photograph albums. Rena was not interested in photography, but for some reason there were lots of pictures of her. Probably because, unlike most other women, she never cared what she looked like and never stopped anyone from snapping her as much as they wanted. This also explained why there were so many amateur photographs, on which she looked nice and natural.

"That was when we went hunting," said Gray. "Rena had never fired a gun before. Strangely enough she turned out to be pretty good at it. Instead of a dead crow the forester hung his cap on the hook for a joke, and Rena shot it to pieces."

"I've never been hunting or fishing," said Homburg sadly. "Thanks to physics, I've lost a great deal. True, in my day scientists never thought of doing things like that."

"What a pity! Here we are fishing. Rena's catching them with her hands, see? You can do that when they're spawning. The fish thresh about in the rushes and lose all sense of caution. You can just put in your hands and pull them out with mud and waterweeds."

"Well, I never!" Homburg exclaimed.

"One day Rena caught a wallet. It must have fallen out of a fisherman's pocket when he was leaning over the water. Rena spread out the contents to dry, and they made up a kind of museum of modern man, one of our contemporaries."

"That's interesting!" said Homburg. "I expect it was a rather pathetic sight, wasn't it?"

"Yes," said Gray quietly, not in the least surprised by Homburg's perspicacity. "The man had no permanent job, so he had to rely on all sorts of documents. There was a free-lance radio reporter's card, a temporary TV studio pass and a permit from the *Evening News*..."

Gray remembered what else had been in the wallet. There were the results of a urine test with traces of protein, a blood test, a gastric juice test with no acidity and a medical certificate for lumbago. The man had either had a medical check-up recently or been in hospital. There were also some crumpled banknotes and coins, a photograph of a tired-looking unattractive woman with "To my one and only" written on it, a publishers' letter rejecting a manuscript, and a copy of a complaint to the city council about a landlord who refused to do the necessary repairs. In a secret section of the wallet was a telephone number written in lipstick on a scrap of restaurant bill, and a laboratory result of a negative Ehrlich test—the short and sweet path of a happy love affair. There was also a letter from a former wife threatening all sorts of unpleasant things unless he paid the alimony regularly, an expired pawn ticket and several photos of the wallet's owner: young and curly-haired on one; jaded and balding on the others.

While the papers were drying, fishermen came up and surveyed them gloomily; either they thought these were the belongings of a drowned man, or they were upset by the poverty of someone else's life in which they could so easily recognise the poverty of their own. But Rena, who had organised this "exhibition" without any ulterior motives, suddenly frowned, wiped away all expression in her deep dark pupils as if she had gone blind, and sank into the gloom which used to drive him to despair. It was a long time before she uttered in her rusty childlike voice: "Poor thing!" Then she had a bit of a cry and cheered up...

"A beautifully shaped head," said Homburg, who had come across some photos of Rena as a child. "And what serious eyes!" It was some time before he turned the page. "Of course, the child contains the whole future person, yes, yes..." Eventually he turned to the page with the only photo of Rena as a teenager: head tossed back provocatively, the soft, slight-

ly blurred outline of the face, but the same eyes—serious, deep, night-time eyes. After this Rena was the same on all the photos, as if, once having come of age, she had remained unchanged in the camera eye and not succumbed to the influence of time.

"I understand the secret of her appeal," Homburg said thoughtfully. "From child to woman—eternal femininity... My poor wife lost all her femininity long ago, now all that remains is the eternal..."

Homburg grew sad. He went on examining the photos carefully, and looking with him, Gray was moved to discover what a role animals played in Rena's life: dogs, cats, squirrels, tortoises and birds. She treated animals like equals, so it was only natural that she did not like some of them, viviparous fish, for example. He, Gray, loved all animals, regarding them as his younger brothers. His love was munificently all-embracing, whereas Rena's was selective and therefore sincere...

"What does a man have, apart from his wife?" Homburg began. "Parents always depart too soon, and children too late, when relationships have been irreparably spoilt. Friends? But they are so rare! A discovery is intimately close so long as it lives in your head, but then it becomes a prostitute who sleeps with all and sundry. Only your wife remains, growing old and weak, getting on your nerves, peevish and silly, but still all you have, eternally yours. She is the only proof that you matter, that you are a person at all."

"I don't have any theories about wives," said Gray quietly. "But I'm unhappy, so unhappy that I simply don't know what to do."

"Marcel Proust once said the real paradise is the one we have lost. Did you really feel that she was a constant source of happiness when she was here?"

"Of course not. But the important thing was that I sometimes forgot she existed. And that was happiness. I have only realised that now, when I can't get away from her for a single minute."

"You only love your wife properly in your old age," said Homburg with a sob. "Don't be angry, dear fellow, I must leave tomorrow..."

Gray did not try to dissuade him. They had looked at all the

albums, and there was no point in Homburg wasting time on official formalities, when he was so worried about his wife.

"There's only one thing I can do now," said Gray, as he saw Homburg to his room. "Immerse myself in some new research. Start something really big. All doors should be open to me now."

Something akin to pity flashed in Homburg's old eyes.

"Don't have any illusions about that, my dear fellow," he said quietly. "Our bosses are very hard-headed people, not easily carried away."

Gray raised his eyebrows questioningly.

"They know perfectly well that no one has ever managed to break the bank twice."

"Ah, I see! So as far as they're concerned I'm played out, eh?"

"The Moor has done his job..."

"Damn the lot of them! I've got money of my own. All I want to do is work."

"That's different," said Homburg in a melancholy voice. "If you've got money..."

"Can you break the bank again? What do you think?"

"You must believe that you can. I don't know. I won some pretty hefty sums, but I didn't break the bank."

"But you've got a wife," said Gray.

Homburg's sudden departure came as a great surprise to the press. They decided that the two great minds had not got on. So you can imagine how amazed they were when, on the platform just before the train left, the frail Homburg in his worn faded coat and the broad-shouldered elegantly dressed Gray embraced each other for a whole minute, if not more. Then Gray ran, wet-eyed, after the train along the platform, as Homburg leaned dangerously out of the window, his upper lip twitching like a rabbit's...

After Homburg left, there came a kind of relief. Gray tried to pray and occasionally wept. He did not pray for Rena to return. He never kidded himself for one moment that the flesh which had been torn off down to the bone would grow again. He prayed for her to leave him completely, and cried out of pity for her, as if the loss of his love would leave her weak, defenceless and no use to anyone. He begged her to forgive him for praying that he should be granted indifference

and freedom. Afraid of being misunderstood by the old man with the beard, he would say: "I'm not asking you to send her back to me, God, that's pointless, because if she came back she would never forgive me for her defeat. Only if we're apart, will I have a place in her heart. She knows that I'm suffering, that I'm unhappy. But I can't take much more, I'm ceasing to be a human being. Let her leave me completely, let her go out of me as she went out of my home. I'm a poor, weak man, but I haven't done anything wrong and I don't want to get bitter. Please set me free!"

Yet he felt somehow alarmed at the idea that God would hear his prayer and free him from Rena. It would be like living without a heart. A normal, calm, full and even safer life, because such a simplified organism would be less liable to go wrong. Yes, of course... But all the same it was better to keep his vulnerable heart. If Rena left completely, there would be emptiness, an awful vacuum which nothing could fill.

Nothing brought the slightest relief. He didn't know what to pray for, what to weep over. He couldn't go on living like this. He couldn't get her back, nor could he rid himself of her entirely. There was no solution. Or rather, there was one and one only. He had read somewhere that time could go backwards. That meant it could be controlled. He must return the time when she was with him and then, while he was in it, stop her from going away.

Reaching this point in his semi-delirium, he realised it was time to see a psychiatrist. But the very thought of medical *belles-lettres*, which was what he called psychiatry to himself, made his blood turn cold. One American doctor had the bright idea of treating not the sick psyche, but the behaviour of his patients, trying to make these creatures with tormented minds ape the actions of so-called normal people and thus stop being a danger to those around them. With a flame roaring in his skull, the unfortunate person gets up in the morning, brushes his teeth and begins to knit a jumper or perform some other simple and useful function. Then at fixed times he or she eats, drinks, performs their natural functions, goes for a walk—all with the inextinguishable fire blazing in their brain—and goes to bed. This psychiatric idyll, of achieving model external behaviour from a person irrespective of his inner state, was appalling. Still, at least the American had

thought up something new. The rest of them were still chewing over the old Freudian cud. And if they discovered that you had never felt an illicit passion for your mother or the overwhelming desire to bump off your father, they were totally disconcerted. The really old-fashioned, but by no means harmless, ones still inhabited a grim world of carbonic baths, cold showers and shock doses of insulin from which the patient got the extra bonus of diabetes.

So Gray did not go and see a psychiatrist. He decided to treat himself. First of all he had to work out what love was, whether it was really important enough to lose both yourself and your life. After considerable reflection and comparison he became convinced that in losing the woman he loved he had lost all his ideas of the world. Now everything he saw, a house, a tree, a bird, a dog, a bench, a letter-box, a staircase, a cloud or a star, contained a hidden injection of pain, because it led through most complex, elusive associations to Rena. It was as if before Rena the world around him had been veiled with mist. It had all been there, yet at the same time nothing had been there, no objects, no creatures, just their shadows. When Rena came everything that dwelt in the world, himself included, was injected with the fullness of being: with colours, smells, sounds, with an obvious higher meaning. Love elevates objects to its own level; and the loss of love turns them into images of pain, but before love comes, objects exist only as a sign of their bare essence. Having reached this vague conclusion, he tried to check whether in fact, when Rena was with him, a tree was a Tree, a fence a Fence, a bench a Bench and a star a Star. Yes, that seemed to be true. Whether it really was, he would never know because now his blood had changed. But if Rena came back, of her own accord, full of love and everything else, would a tree become a Tree again, a fence a Fence and a star a Star?

Why try to guess? She couldn't come back the same as she was before. Her blood had changed too. She could only come back humiliated, and she would make him suffer for her humiliation by a tree not becoming a Tree, a fence not becoming a Fence and a star not becoming a Star. Although perhaps they would just for a moment, the very first moment... No, her return would not save him...

Gray turned to books. He had read a great deal at one time,

until his work started to consume nearly all his leisure. He wasn't a person who could read wherever he was. As a child he had been brought up to respect books, strange miraculous objects far more mysterious and incredible than all the wonders engendered by Einstein's formula.

In Rena's room he discovered a pile of uncut magazines and a pile of books which, judging by the dog-eared pages, had been read. There were names he had heard of and new names which sounded so unfamiliar and strange that it was hard to believe they meant anything. He began to read avidly, but usually gave up in the middle, for they did not quench his thirst. He realised that recently everyone had learnt to write. There was hardly any bad prose and no very bad prose at all. The average level of "threading words" had gone up immensely. All prose writers possessed if not a turn of phrase, at least an intonation which created the illusion of one. They had all mastered the knack of standing out from other writers, but there was nothing to read. The emotional, bitter-sweet portrayal of life had been replaced by a mockingly charming, caustic verbiage, behind which lay emptiness. Whatever came within the present-day writer's field of vision, an ash-tray or a flower, was described with microscopic accuracy and stupefying scrupulousness. Marcel Proust could also describe in the greatest of detail a hawthorn bush, say, or some biscuits, yet he did so not for the sake of the hawthorn or the biscuits, but for the sake of the hero-narrator, in whom the miraculous birth of memory was taking place. Proust is profoundly humane, whereas the writer of today is inhumane. If he treats you to a spot of undiluted hawthorn bush, so to say, it is not a symbol of a higher life, but hawthorn bush pure and simple, dammit! And you can't accept it as such. You keep looking for another, higher meaning in this soulless clutter of materialist detail. You want to huddle up with your pain to imagery that seems to have a meaning, yet you find nothing but emptiness. Cold, shining emptiness...

He stopped reading. Now his days grew full of the fear of death. Why days? The fear of death was stronger at night. Particularly when he switched out the light and pretended that his heavy eyelids, the uncertain gesture of his hand groping for the switch, were a guarantee of instant deep sleep. But sleep vanished as soon as the awareness of pitch darkness

penetrated his brain. Terror gripped his heart, and Gray would jump up and sit on the bed, groaning quietly. The outline of the window appeared slowly and the smooth glass panes, then things outside gradually took shape. The terror receded and was replaced by sadness which did not leave him until daybreak, when he fell asleep, usually sitting up.

He had never known the fear of death before. He had lived so seriously and profoundly, that he did not have the time to be afraid of it. But that seems to be a general rule: people who live unhappily are far more afraid of death than those who lead a full, happy life. Now, however, he had a special reason to be afraid of dying young; he had to live long enough for his blood to change, his cells to be replaced and his whole organism, his whole psyche, to become different, long enough for all the bad things in him to disappear. Only then could he be with Rena again. Let them come together again when they were old. He wasn't too concerned about physical intimacy, God knows. But old people don't have long to live, that's why they're old, and it would be awful if their new life together was short. Or would it? What if they had only one day, one single day, but it was theirs, theirs and only theirs right up to the end, wouldn't that be enough? In one day you could say all your words, weep all your tears and breathe in your fill of the dear one close to you. Then let them throw your bones in a sack on the scrap heap. All your dreams would have come true, you would have lived your life to the full.

But then a sense of greed awoke in him. A day with Rena was not enough, nor was a year, ten years. Not even eternity was enough...

...Unnoticed by him, for when a person is unhappy everything happens unnoticed, autumn arrived, cold and windy, with dry white snow that swept the foot of the houses in the morning. Forlorn and somehow pathetic in its pointless size, the large monument in Central Square, still covered by tarpaulin, was swept with snow too. The unveiling of this monument "To the Benefactor of Mankind" had still not taken place. Gray kept putting off the ceremony with various excuses. He told his acquaintances jokingly that he wanted to postpone the happy moment when all the pigeons in the city, plump, clumsy, crafty birds, would be able to perch on his

huge head, the size of a beer barrel and made of pure gold with a wreath of diamonds.

In fact he was dreading having to face the crowd: the huge square would be packed with the representatives of all the nations inhabiting the globe. He still bore an old childhood grudge against people. He realised that it was silly, inhuman and sinful, but could not do anything about it. He looked at people crowding streets, storming buses and trolleybuses, diving into the dark jaws of metro stations and subways, pushing one another, arguing, laughing, sometimes gay and carefree, but more often worried, gloomy and tired, and thought: "Surely this crowd brimming with such energy can help me? After all there's not a single person who is not affected by my discovery. If only one of them would show some concern for me. Yet if I were to shout at the top of my voice: 'I'm unhappy! Help me, someone!' nobody would be able to do anything. The real trouble is not lack of desire to help, but the impossibility of helping. My sickness is incurable, so there's no point in being angry with other people. They're not to blame..."

Then a small event took place. Not even an event, in fact, but just someone uttering a few words that made him snap out of his morose lethargy and brought him back to life, tenderness and tears. Nanny simply said:

"She must be cold. Why don't you take her fur coat to her?"

Good God, how simple and natural it sounded: "She must be cold!" Her fragile bones were cold, there were goose pimples on her sallow skin smooth as a child's, her knees and the softness underneath them were frozen. She was huddled up, raising the collar of the light raincoat in which she had left and trying to protect her chest and neck with a scarf, but she was still cold. The wind went right through her, the dry white snow beat against her collar and ran down her spine in slow melting streams. She had left without thinking that she would be cold, or perhaps she hadn't expected their parting to last until the cold weather. No, she had known she was leaving for good, but a delicate tact had stopped her from taking all the material things she would need. When it started getting cold, she had probably thought he would remember about her and protect her from the cold, but in his brutish egoism, his selfish concern with his own suffering, it had never even occurred to

him. Even senile old Nanny had remembered that she might be cold.

So this trifle, this cold spell in early autumn, removed the veil of unreality from Rena and restored her to what she was, an ordinary person, alive and vulnerable, who could feel the cold, who was feverish and lost, who shivered in the wind, blew on her frozen fingers and hurried to a warm room. Gray suddenly had a completely different picture of her life without him: the small daily problems, the need to cook, to make telephone calls, meet people, organise her affairs. He had pictured her in the sunny, mystical light of a Beatrice, whereas in fact she was leading the ordinary busy life of an average person without any special amenities or advantages. She wasn't poor, she had enough money to live on, but of course she couldn't afford a new fur coat. He must make sure she was warm, not complicating matters with any explanations, simply give her the coat of light soft attractive fur and her fur hat and fur-lined suede boots. And that was all.

He suddenly felt a burst of energy that reminded him in miniature of his earlier shattering advance towards his goal, like an atomic explosion in a physics lab at school. With incredible speed, not showing any of his trumps, he found out everything about Rena's life, her address, her daily routine and even the fact that she would be at the Continental Restaurant that evening.

He had been planning to take round her clothes the next morning, but by evening the temperature was below freezing point and it was snowing, real big cotton-wool snowflakes. And he realised that he should put it off no longer. She would be very cold when she went to the restaurant.

After folding and packing her things quickly and neatly in a long attractive packet, he put on his dinner jacket, phoned for a taxi and drove to the Continental.

He had never been to this new, recently opened place at the foot of the television tower. Built entirely of glass, the Continental reminded one of a huge aquarium. Through the semi-transparent curtains filtered a milky light with green, red and brown spots rotating smoothly in it, like fish swimming in a pool of milk. The restaurant was already very popular and besieged by a crowd waiting to get in. Mainly young people in corduroy or suede jackets. It was situated between the artists'

quarter, where painters lived, and the university, and was evidently more popular with the former. "Although these days it's hard to tell students from bohemians," Gray thought. Fancy him putting on evening dress! The entrance to the restaurant was blocked by the massive figure of the doorman in a double-breasted jacket with gold braid and a peaked cap, who looked more like a chucker-out than a respectable commissionaire. A heavy bony forehead protruded over the piggy eyes and the short bridge of the pug nose. An ex-boxer perhaps? Anyone trying to get into the restaurant was stopped with a rude: "Can't you see it's full up?"

Gray got the same rough treatment, but did not give up. He mentioned his name and academic rank, but the ex-boxer seemed not to understand what he was saying. When Gray tried to stuff some money into his paw, the boxer opened his fingers and the crumpled note fell into the mud. In despair Gray did something quite extraordinary for him. He grabbed hold of the doorman's sleeve, sensing the iron muscles under the cloth, and shouted:

"But I'm Gray, see, Gray. The Benefactor of Mankind!"

Something resembling a mockingly understanding smile appeared on the flat, pancake-like face with the pug nose.

"Been smoking, old boy? Beat it!"

Gray stepped back dejectedly. Now and then the doorman opened up silently to let in some rather unsavoury-looking characters. At first Gray thought they must be people who had booked a table, but then he heard a phrase which all these favoured ones trotted out like a password:

"Layo-Mayo!"

He realised what this meant, when he scrutinised the forbidden entrance and saw a poster announcing a guest tour by a South American jazz trio called Layo Mayo. They must have been new stars, because Gray, who was quick to notice all sorts of trivia, had never heard of such an original sounding group—Layo-Mayo. The poster showed three young men in gaudy shirts playing the saxophone, the drums and the double-bass. The first had a thin, curved body and looked like a question mark. His big hands with long, strong fingers were like those of a strangler. The second, large and broad-cheeked with a beard, was gripping a drum-stick like a cudgel. The third had hidden his face be-

hind the double-bass, showing one affectedly downcast eye with an eyelash half-way down his cheek. Their roles were easy to define: the schizo, the giant and the whore. But that was not the point.

Gray retired round the corner, turned his coat inside out so that the shaggy lining showed, put up the collar and buttoned it right up to the top to hide the starched collar and tie, pulled his fur cap down onto his nose and walked quickly to the door holding the parcel in his outstretched hand.

"Layo-Mayo!" he shouted, disguising his voice for some reason and thrusting the parcel under the doorman's nose.

The latter did not even glance at him. The great trio's name acted like a magical "Open Sesame!"

Inside the restaurant was not a bit like an aquarium. Here was modern severity and clarity of form embodied in metal and concrete, a bad-mannered crowd of people, a scent of perfume, cigarette smoke and various plants. Somewhere in the distance the double-bass player was tuning up. A melancholy solitary sigh from a thick string fell heavily into the steady, almost artificial hum of the restaurant. The main attraction had not begun yet—the music box of the fabulous Layo-Mayo trio was still silent.

There was a total mixture of styles. Corduroy jackets of artists and sloppy students' clothes predominated. There were quite a few counterfeit hippies, long hair washed with Dior soap, wearing carefully torn jeans bought at a special shop and expensive dirty footwear. But there were also some well-dressed people: women with bare arms in long tightly-fitting gowns and men in evening dress. Gray had no reason to be embarrassed by his elegant appearance. Suddenly he felt the mundane, stereotype festivities of the restaurant steal into his heart and melt there with forgotten ease. Everything about life was good, dammit: the cheap music, the ice-cold drinks, the slightly languid, dense warmth of the air-conditioning, the thick steak on glowing charcoal so quickly covered with light bluish ash, all the details of this make-believe existence which was leading him to another, not make-believe at all, where, feeling the sharp elbow through the thin fur of her coat, he would guide Rena to the big glass doors that stared into the night of the snow-covered city.

His burst of excitement subsided almost at once. The

crowd around him showed no sign of enjoyment, even the trivial, superficial sort that one finds in almost any communal leisure activity. The people in that motley crowd had only one thing in common, their lack of sociability. It was as if all of them, even those who had come in couples, were not on speaking terms with each other. They seemed not to be aware that they were together and made no attempt to find out. And they displayed the same total indifference to everything around them. There was no contact at all. Each remained locked in his own shell.

At that moment he caught sight of Rena incredibly close to him. She was sitting at the end table in the main hall, half turned towards him, in the company of a woman with ash-coloured hair and two young men, none of whom he had ever seen before.

She was smoking, exhaling the smoke strongly as she always did. It came out of her nostrils in two blue jets, and the ash kept falling on her sleeve, the tablecloth, the edge of her plate, everywhere except the ashtray, although she dutifully flicked the cigarette with her finger in the direction of the ashtray from time to time. All this was familiar, breathtakingly familiar to Gray. Like her habit of not hearing and not listening to a person who was talking to her. One of the young men was telling a story, but Rena's eyes were staring into the distance, and from the talker's pained expression you could tell that he was hurt by her lack of attention. Gray felt sympathy, almost affection for the young man who had taken his place beside Rena, but could not make her listen to him. Had Gray himself ever been able to command her attention? No. At the beginning she had listened to him and taken notice, later she only listened, but did not pay attention. Now she was not even pretending to listen. Her face looked tired and a bit older. The skin had got drier and darker, stretching more tightly over the cheekbones and round the mouth. Her short bristly eyelashes bore no mascara, and her hairstyle was simple and smooth. She usually made up her eyes with some black and blue stuff, pencilling the corners right up to her ears, and backcombed her hair very high, spending hours on it with those revolting metal rollers. Was it good or bad, this new indifference to her appearance? Perhaps she'd started to work properly at last, and the rubbish which used to fill her

empty days had been discarded? Or was it the influence of the young man with the pained expression, who liked things to be natural?

Rena dropped ash on the tablecloth for the last time and stubbed her cigarette out in the ashtray. While she was doing this her eyes looked round absent-mindedly and met Gray's for an instant. He turned pale, gave a trembling smile and raised his hand. But Rena's face remained impassive, and her eyes wandered on before returning to her friends. She hadn't noticed him. Or, rather, her thoughts were so far removed from him, that in the short glimpse of him she had not recognised her former husband. His gesture and smile had not jogged her memory. That could never have happened to Gray. He saw Rena in every woman, because he was constantly hoping to meet her.

Gray experienced a poignant sense of isolation, of being excluded totally and finally from Rena's life. She had not been pining, regretting and suffering like him at all. She had simply stopped thinking about him completely.

The sweat broke out on his forehead. Why on earth had he assumed that Rena was suffering because they had parted, searching inside herself for a way back to him, that what had happened between them meant something to her emotionally? If he went up to her now she would feel nothing but embarrassment and irritation. He had invented her for himself. The woman sitting in front of him now bore no relation to his invention, just an outward resemblance, perhaps, but not much of that either.

The young man finished his story and smiled pathetically. There was no response from the other three, as if he had never opened his mouth. Then Rena started talking. She was good at telling stories, sometimes amusing, sometimes bitchy, sometimes with a kind of aggressive kindness, but always spicy and entertaining. Yet there was not a trace of animation on her face. She seemed to be speaking into a vacuum, her lips moving mechanically, on their own, her thoughts far away. Only the young man with the pathetic hurt eyes listened. The other two sat with the same blank, vacant look. She didn't need anyone.

Gray realised what it was that had taken Rena away from him, long long ago, hopelessly and irrevocably: it was what

pervaded the atmosphere of this caravanserai more strongly than the smell of cigarettes, perfume and hot-house plants, what covered all the faces with a dull glaze, draining the sparkle from their eyes and the joy from their smiles. Total alienation, that's what it was; the cold inhumanity of a world in which everything was bought and sold, a world where indifference, fearful as death, reigned supreme.

And if one took this to its logical extreme, Rena was not to blame. The same force that had deprived Homburg of work, an aim in life, even a name, and taken over Gray's discovery, had also taken Rena away from him. There was no point in trying to get to the bottom of it and trace all the complex links. Suffice it to say that Rena was a particle, a victim of this reality. He had always comforted himself with the thought that he lived in a social vacuum, blissfully protected by his research. That was nonsense! No one and nothing is safe from carnivorous dentures. He too had been chewed up lock, stock and barrel.

He summoned the maitre d'hotel with his starched shirt front.

"Would you kindly give this parcel to that lady over there."

The maitre d'hotel bent down, revealing the white thread of his parting.

"And if the lady asks who it is from?"

"Tell her it's from Layo-Mayo." Gray walked over to the exit.

He went into the street, took a deep breath of the thawing, empty air, and realised that it was the end. It had got warmer and stopped snowing. The snow was melting blackly under the wheels of cars and the feet of passersby.

Gray had been gutted good and proper. All the painful tissue had been successfully removed, but the area affected was too large. What remained was not enough for him to go on living. Rena had taken away his past, his last consolation. Now he knew that not only the future held nothing for him, but also the past. They existed in different systems of coordinates, in different dimensions, even in different times. They could not meet again, because they never had met. He could sense the illusions of the past on his tongue like the taste of copper. He spat, scorching a black hole in the snow. All that remained of his life was a taste of copper.

He had an old revolver which he had kept since the war. It was given to him by a childhood friend, a war correspondent, who turned up one day in their field hospital. He had rubbed a blister on his foot and went to ask for a plaster. They reminisced about their schoolmates, alive and dead, and his friend gave him this old revolver, which had never been cleaned. His friend did not return from the war. He was killed by a piece of shrapnel. Gray kept the revolver in memory of him. Today he found it tucked away at the back of his desk, heavy, black, primitive and old-fashioned, like duelling pistols from the beginning of the last century. It was hard to believe you could shoot with it.

There was one cartridge in the cylinder. Gray cocked the gun, put the barrel to his chest and pressed the trigger. There was a click, and Gray doubled up instinctively, but no shot followed. What was the matter? Gray sat motionless for a few seconds. The unsuccessful attempt had changed nothing. He pulled out the cylinder again and realised what had gone wrong. When you cock a revolver, the cylinder rotates, and he had not taken this into account when he loaded the cartridge. Now he did everything properly. He noted how efficient his movements were, but this did not surprise him. He had not been able to understand how people could voluntarily give up their life and had never felt sorry for them, considering them to be worthless. Now he knew that one should indeed not feel sorry for people who commit suicide, but for a different reason. Suicide is a way of speeding up the end of a life which has become completely pointless. You should feel happy for a man who manages to overcome blind instinct, the fear of physical pain and some rudimentary moral inhibitions, instead of simply rotting alive...

...Gray left no note, and it was officially considered that he had shot himself accidentally while cleaning his old revolver, a cherished patriotic relic. No one believed this, of course. Most people thought he had taken his life as a result of excessive nervous and mental stress. Only a few, who knew better, connected the suicide with his wife's departure...

...Academician Moore, director of the Gray World Cancer Institute, happened to meet Paul Homburg at an international congress. The conversation naturally turned to Gray, and Moore spoke harshly of him.

"In my opinion he was not much of a person if he could take his life over such a trifle."

"Pardon me, but you're speaking of his wife!" Homburg remonstrated mildly.

"What difference does it make?"

"Pardon me again, all the difference in the world! If my wife were to ... leave me..." Homburg's upper lip with the droopy moustache twitched rabbit-like and his sad eyes filled with tears, "I would do the same..." He gulped, took out a large handkerchief, blew his nose loudly and wiped his eyes.

After folding and tucking away the handkerchief, he said in a murderously confidential tone:

"You know, old chap, I've just realised why you and your like will never discover anything worthwhile. Because you would never commit suicide if your wife left you."

ALEXEI TOLSTOY



A leading Soviet writer, Alexei Tolstoy (1883-1945) was an aristocrat by birth—he inherited the title of count—and a distant relative of Lev Tolstoy. He studied engineering at the St. Petersburg Technological Institute. It was his admiration for symbolist poetry that inspired him to write. His early stories, such as those of the collection *Eccentrics* (1910), depict the decay of the life of the provincial gentry. At first opposing the Revolution, Alexei Tolstoy emigrated in 1919, going to Paris and then to Berlin. In 1923 he returned to the Soviet Union where he was hailed as a great writer. His books were tremendously popular: with Sholokhov he was probably the most widely read novelist of the late 1930s and the early 1940s.

Tolstoy's masterpiece is his trilogy, *Ordeal* (completed in 1941) which attempts to give a broad picture of the historical events of the Revolution and Civil War, and their effect on a group of intellectuals, who at first oppose the Reds, but gradually come to understand and accept the "people's" cause. The unfinished *Peter the Great* (1929-45) also has claims to be regarded as a masterpiece. Though Péter is the central figure, the author gives a vivid portrayal of Russia at the time of Europeanization. Tolstoy was to try his hand at sci-fi: the fantastic romance, *Aelita* (1924), was followed by *Engineer Garin's Death Ray* (1925-26); Tolstoy also wrote two plays about Ivan the Terrible in which Ivan's cruelty is minimized as incidental to his struggle to unite and strengthen the Russian land.

COUNT CAGLIOSTRO

1

In Smolensk Uyezd, on the tall bank of the river, in the middle of a hilly plain, covered with stripes of wheat fields and small birch woods, sprawled an estate called White Springs, the ancient family seat of the Princes Tulupov. The original wooden house, standing in a dip of the land, had been boarded up and abandoned. The new mansion with columns in the Greek style faced the river and the fields beyond. At the back of the house there were two wings

which stretched into the park, complete with ponds, islands, and fountains.

Besides, in different corners of the park one could come upon a stone woman with an arrow, or an urn with this inscription on the socle: "Sit here a while and ponder how fleet is time", or else some sad ruins, now tangled in creepers. The house and the park had been completed some five years earlier when the mistress of White Springs, Princess Praskovia Tulupova, widow of the Brigadier, suddenly died in her prime. The estate was inherited by her third cousin Alexei Fedyashev, then serving as an officer in St. Petersburg.

Alexei sent in his papers and settled down to a quiet existence in the privacy of White Springs together with his aunt Fedosia Ivanovna Fedyasheva. He was a quiet, dreamy sort, and still very young—he had just turned nineteen. He gladly resigned from the military service because the noise and bustle of the Court receptions, the din of the regimental drinking parties, the laughter of the beauties at the balls, the smell of powder and the rustle of their silk skirts gave him a splitting headache and a stitch in his heart.

With quiet joy he welcomed this privacy amid the fields and woods. Sometimes he rode out to look at the haymaking or reaping, sometimes he sat angling on the bank of the river under an old willow, and sometimes he gave orders for the village girls to dance around the pond in the park and watched this picturesque scene from a window. On winter evenings he read avidly, while Fedosia Ivanovna played solitaire, as the wind howled in the tall garrets, and the little old man who took care of the stoves shuffled along the creaking floorboards to stoke up the fire here and there.

And that is how they lived, in peace and quiet. But soon Fedosia Ivanovna began to notice that something was not quite right with Alexis, as she called her nephew. He was strangely moody, absent-minded and pale. And once Fedosia Ivanovna ventured to say to him:

"Isn't it time, my dear, for you to take the plunge and marry, because, after all, if you go on looking at an old mushroom like me all life long, something might go wrong with you..."

What a hope! He actually stamped his foot in anger.

"Stop it, auntie... I have no wish now or ever to sink into

such boring prosiness: going about in a dressing-gown all day long and playing *tré-septs* with guests... And then whom would you have me marry, I'd like to know?"

"Prince Shakhmatov has five daughters," replied his aunt. "All excellent wenches. And then Prince Patrikeyev has fourteen daughters... Then there are the Svinyins—Sasha, Masha, Dasha..."

"Ah, auntie, auntie dear, all the girls you have named possess excellent qualities, but just think: supposing my heart is fired with passion, we marry, and what then? The one whose glove or garter should excite and thrill me, starts running about with a bunch of keys, poking into the barn, puttering in the store-rooms, or else ordering chicken noodle soup for dinner and spooning it up in my presence..."

"But why must it be noodle soup, Alexis? And even if it is noodle soup, what's wrong with that?"

"No, auntie, only a superhuman passion could break down my melancholy... But there is no woman capable of this in the world."

Saying this he glanced with languid longing at the wall on which hung a large, full-length portrait of the beautiful Praskovia Tulupova. Then, with a sigh, he snugly wrapped himself into his dressing-gown made of silk with a Chinese pattern, filled his pipe, and settled down in an armchair at the window, to puff on his pipe and gaze at the thin plumes of smoke curling up.

However, it seems that he did let something slip and his aunt did understand something, because, glancing at him in wonder, she said:

"If you're a man, then love a woman and not some lunatic dream, for mercy's sake..."

Alexei said nothing in reply. In the yard, overgrown with curly grass, where his bored gaze travelled, a reddish calf stood sucking at the ear of another calf. The yard sloped down to the river, on the bank of which, amid the burdocks sat several white geese, much like lumps of snow; one of the geese rose, flapped its wings and sat down again. It was sultry and quiet at this midday hour. Hazy waves of heat hovered and quivered above the wheat fields beyond the river. A peasant came riding along the road that emerged from a small birch wood, then he went down to the ford, the

horse stepped belly-deep into the water and began to drink. Now he turned the horse round, scattering the frightened geese, galloped up the slope, sticking out his elbows and dangling his bare feet, called out something to a servant girl carrying an armful of straw, guffawed, but suddenly noticing the master in the window, quickly jumped down from the horse and doffed his cap. This was the Fedyashevs' messenger boy who was sent once a week to fetch the mail. This time he brought a letter for Fedosia Ivanovna and a batch of books for the master.

Fedosia Ivanovna went to fetch her glasses. Alexei started glancing through the books. His attention was caught by an article in the 28th issue of the *Economic Magazine* on the causes of hypochondria. "The primary unfortunate source of hypochondria is a cruel and lasting indulgence in carnal desires and such passions which maintain the spirit in perpetual melancholy; a man, troubled by such desires for which he does not see an outlet, seeks privacy, sinks more and more into the depths of sadness, until at last the nerves of his stomach and intestines become utterly exhausted..."

After reading these lines, Alexei closed the book. And so, hypochondria was in store for him, since there was no outlet for the passion, devouring his soul.

2

About half a year ago, when Alexei was finishing the interior decoration of some of the rooms, he went to the old house to see if there were any things there worth salvaging. He remembered going there as if it were yesterday. The sun was setting in colours that presaged hard frost. Dry snow was already swirling over the cooling fields. An ancient crow, croaking harshly, took wing from a birch tree, adorned with hoarfrost, and sifted snow over Alexei who, in a jacket lined with fox fur, was walking along a path on the river bank which had just been swept clean of snow.

A village girl, squatting beside the ice-hole on the river, was drawing water; she filled her pails, lifted them on the yoke over her shoulder, and went home, turning her round, black-

browed face at the master every now and again. In the village, lights were appearing in the snow-crusted little windows in the cottages here and there between the snowdrifts; gates could be heard creaking, and voices that sounded clear in the frosty air. A bleak, peaceful picture.

Alexei mounted the porch steps of the old house, ordered the boards to be ripped off the front door, and entered the rooms. Everything was covered with dust, everything terribly old and gone to rack and ruin. The servant boy who walked ahead of him with a lantern threw the light on some gilding on the wall, and then on broken bits of furniture dumped into a corner. A large rat ran across the room. Apparently, everything of any value at all had been taken out of the house. Alexei was about to turn back, but then, going past a low-ceilinged empty room, he looked in and saw, hanging crookedly on the wall, a large, full-length portrait of a young woman. The servant boy raised the lantern. There was a film of dust on the canvas, but the colours were fresh, and Alexei discerned a face of wondrous beauty, smoothily dressed and powdered hair, arched eyebrows, a small and passionate mouth with the corners curling up, and a cream-coloured gown cut very low on the high, maidenly bosom. The hand which lay serenely under the breast held a rose.

Alexei guessed that this was a portrait of the late Princess Praskovia Pavlovna Tulupova, his third cousin whom he had seen only when he was a child. He had the portrait moved to the new house an once and hung in the library.

He saw the portrait there before him all the time. Whether he was reading a book—he loved reading the description of travels in savage lands—or making notes in his note-book, while smoking a pipe, or whether in his slippers sown with glass beads he was simply wandering about the rooms with the freshly waxed hardwood floors, he would pause for a long look at the lovely portrait. Little by little he bestowed upon this image all the most excellent qualities of kindness, wisdom and passion. To himself he started calling Praskovia Pavlovna the friend who shared his lonely hours and inspired his dreams.

Once, he had a dream about her in which she was as motionless and haughty as in the portrait, but the rose in her

hand was fresh, he reached for it but could not take it out of her hand. He awoke with an alarmingly beating heart and a burning head. After that night he could not look at the portrait without a thrill of excitement. The woman in it had wholly captured his imagination.

3

Fedosia Ivanovna came back with the letter in her hand, her spectacles on her nose, and, seating herself in an armchair facing Alexei, said:

"Pavel Petrovich writes..."

"What Pavel Petrovich, auntie?"

"Why, bless you, Alexis, my dear, Pavel Petrovich Fedyashev, the second-major... Well then, he writes about this and that, and here's something for you: 'A great to-do has been caused here with us in St. Petersburg by the well-known Count Fenix, or as he is called—Cagliostro. He cured Princess's Volkonskaya's sick pearls, increased the ruby in General Bibikov's ring by eleven carats, and what's more, destroyed the air bubble inside the stone. He showed Kostich the famous deal in a bowl of punch, and the very next day Kostich won more than a hundred thousand roubles. For Golovina, the lady-in-waiting, he materialized the ghost of her dead husband out of her locket, and the husband actually spoke to her and held her hand, after which the poor old lady became quite daft... In short, the miracles are too many to enumerate... The Empress was of a mind to summon him to the palace, but here a most funny thing happened. Prince Potyomkin fell violently in love with the wife of this Count Fenix, a Chech lady, I have not seen her myself, but people say she is a beauty. Potyomkin had a lot of money, costly carpets and objets d'art passed on to the Count, but when he saw there was no buying him off with money, he decided to steal the beauty at his own ball. But that very day the Count, together with his wife, vanished from St. Petersburg no one knows where, and the police have been looking for them in vain till this day...' "

Alexei listened to the letter very attentively, and then read it over himself. A light flush appeared on his cheeks.

"All these miracles are a manifestation of an incomprehensible magnetic force," he said. "If only I could meet that man... Oh, if I could just meet him..." He started pacing the floor, uttering these ejaculations: "Oh, if only ... I would find the right words to persuade him... Let him experiment on me... Let him embody my dream... Let my dream become reality, and let my life dissolve like smoke. I won't regret it..."

Fedosia Ivanovna looked at her nephew with fright, her faded eyes all but starting out of her head. It was enough to give anyone a fright. Alexei had flung himself into an armchair and with a dreamy smile stared through the window at the two village girls who had come close to the window with a basket of mushrooms, but he saw neither the mushrooms, nor the girls, not the field where a tall pillar of dust started whirling along a balk, and drifted away, swirling and scaring the birds in the roadside birch.

4

The next morning Alexei woke up with a splitting headache. The sky was sultry in spite of the early hour. The leaves hung motionlessly on the trees, everything seemed mesmerized, and the green had a metallic sheen like the leaves on a tin gravestone wreath. The hens did not cluck; a red cow that looked bloated lay without moving or chewing on the slope going down to the river. Even the sparrows were subdued. In the north-east, close to the ground the colour of the sky was dark, dull and harsh.

The steward came into the dining-room with his report. Alexei left him with Fedosia Ivanovna and, grimacing from the pain in his temples, went to the library, opened a book but very soon grew bored with it, so he took up a pen, but all he could do was practise his signature.

Then he began to contemplate the portrait of Praskovia Pavlovna, but even the portrait, like everything else around him, seemed cruel and sinister. Three flies were sitting on the face. Alexei felt that he would burst into sobs if everything that surrounded him remained so glaringly clear-cut and harsh much longer. His soul was sick with misery.

Suddenly, a window banged open somewhere in the house, there was the sound of shattered glass and frightened voices. Alexei went and stood at the library window. A huge, dense cloud, as dark as the sky at night, was advancing on the estate, creeping low over the fields. The water in the river turned dark blue and had a sullen look. The reeds thrashed about and then lay down in crumpled heaps. A strong wind picked up the goose feathers on the bank, tore the crow's nest down from the old willow, tousled the branches, chased the hens down the yard, rocked the wooden fence, picked up the skirt of a peasant woman and threw it over her head, and then pounced on the house with all its might, tore into the windows and set up a wail in the chimneys. A flash of light appeared in the dark cloud and with blinding zigzags like a tree root ran all the way down to the ground. The sky split apart, and thunder crashed. The house shook. The spring in the mantlepiece clock rang madly in response.

Alexei was standing at the window with the wind tearing at his long hair and fluttering the skirts of his dressing-gown. His aunt came running in, she gripped him by the hand, pulled him away from the window and shouted something, but the second, even more terrible crash of thunder, drowned out her words. The next minute came the first heavy drops of rain, and then it came pouring down in a grey curtain, drumming and frothing on the panes of the closed window. It grew quite dark outside.

"Alexis," said his aunt, still breathing heavily from the scare she had suffered. "I'm telling you: we have guests."

"Guests? Who are they?"

"I don't rightly know myself. Their carriage broke down, they're frightened of the storm and are asking us to put them up for the night."

"They're welcome, of course."

"I've already given the orders. They're taking off their wet things just now. And you might go and dress too."

Alexei hurried out of the library, but in the door he all but collided with Fimka, the parlourmaid, who cannoned in with her hair hanging loose, her sarafan rain-soaked, and cried in a panic:

"Mistress, mistress dear, these guests, I swear it's the honest truth—one of them is as black as the devil!"

The rain went on pouring for the rest of the day, and candles had to be lit earlier than usual. Quiet came after the storm. The windows and doors into the garden were flung open, and there a gentle, warm rain was falling in the darkness, pattering softly on the leaves.

Alexei stood in the door wearing a silk kaftan, a waistcoat with a design of forget-me-nots woven on the cream ground, he carried a sword and his hair had been curled and powdered. The wet grass on the lawn looked grey where the light fell on it. The air smelt of damp and flowers.

Alexei stood looking at the lighted windows of the right wing of the house which was built in a semicircle and ended behind the lime trees. There, shadows appeared on the lowered white window curtains: now the shadow of a man in a huge wig, now the graceful shadow of a woman, and now that of the servant—a tall person wearing a turban.

They were the guests. They had long changed their wet clothes, had had a rest, and were now evidently dressing for dinner. Alexei watched the movement of the shadows on the curtains with impatience. The smell of the rain, the flowers and the burning candles made him dizzy.

And now the long shadow of the servant appeared again, it bowed and vanished, and measured steps were heard in the house. Alexei stepped back from the door. In came a tall, perfectly black man, the whites of his eyes like hard-boiled eggs. He had on a long raspberry-red robe belted with a scarf, and another scarf was wound round his head. With a deferential, yet dignified bow he said in broken French:

"My master salutes you, sir, and has asked me to tell you that he accepts your invitation to have supper with you with exceptional pleasure."

Alexei smiled and, coming close to him, asked:

"Tell me please what is your master's name and title?"

With a sigh the servant dropped his head.

"I do not know."

"What do you mean—you don't know?"

"His name has been concealed from me."

"Oh, I can see you're a rogue, my good man. But then your own name, at least, can you tell me?"

"Margadon."

"What are you—an Ethiopian?"

"I was born in Nubia," Margadon replied calmly, looking down on Alexei. "In the reign of Pharaoh Amenkhosiris I was taken prisoner and sold to my master."

Alexei backed away from him and frowned.

"What nonsense are you telling me? How old are you then?"

"Over three thousand."

"See if I don't tell your master to have you flogged properly for this!" cried Alexei, flushing an angry red. "Get out!"

Margadon bowed as deferentially as before and walked out. Alexei cracked his fingers as he pulled himself together, then he pondered for a moment and burst out laughing.

At this very moment the servant boy flung open both halves of the carved door, and into the room came a gentleman with a lady on his arm. Bows and introductions began.

The gentleman was perhaps in his fifties and solidly built. His purplish-red face with a hooked nose was cushioned in lace. His huge wig with locks, of a style worn at the dawn of the century, was carelessly powdered. His coat of stiff blue silk was embroidered in gold thread with masks and flowers. On top of this coat he wore a green overcoat lined with blue foxes. His black stockings were also embroidered with gold thread. Diamonds sparkled on the buckles of his velvet shoes, and each finger of his blunt, hairy hands was adorned with two or even three precious rings.

In a huskyish deep voice this gentleman greeted his host, and then, moving a step aside from the lady, presented her.

"Countess—our host. Sir—my wife."

This done, he busied himself with his snuff-box, sniffing, blowing his nose, and throwing back his head. Alexei expressed his regret to the Countess on account of the bad weather and his keenest delight which this unexpected acquaintance with them afforded him. He offered her his arm, and led the way to the table.

The Countess answered him in monosyllables and seemed tired and depressed. But even so she was startlingly lovely. Her blond hair was dressed simply. Her face, a face of a child rather than that of a woman, seemed transparent, for so soft and clear was the skin; she kept her eyelids modestly lowered

over her blue eyes, and her sweet mouth slightly parted—she must have been gladly breathing in the freshness pouring in from the garden.

Fedosia Ivanovna met the guests at the table laden with cold and hot dishes. Her French was poor, the guests did not speak Russian at all, and so Alexei had to do all the talking. The guests, it appeared, were travelling from St. Petersburg to Warsaw without changing horses and had already been on the road for two weeks.

"Do forgive me," said Alexei, "but I did not quite get your name."

"Count Fenix," replied the guest, greedily plunging his strong white teeth into a chicken leg.

Alexei quickly set down the glass that had started shaking badly in his hand, and turned whiter than his napkin.

6

"Then you are the celebrated Cagliostro whose miracles the whole world is talking about?" asked Alexei.

Count Fenix raised his shaggy greying eyebrows, poured some wine into his glass and poured it down his throat, without gulping.

"Yes, I'm Cagliostro," he said, complacently smacking his thick lips. "The whole world is talking about my wonders. But that comes from ignorance. There are no wonders. Just knowledge of natural elements, that is to say: fire, water, earth and air; the substances of nature, that is, the solid, the liquid, the soft, and the volatile; the forces of nature: attraction, repulsion, motion and tranquility; the elements of nature of which there are thirty six, and finally the energy of nature: electric, magnetic, light, and sensitive. All this is subordinate to three things: knowledge, logic and will, which are contained right here," at this, he banged himself on the forehead. He put his napkin down on the table, took a golden toothpick out of his waistcoat pocket, and went to work at his teeth with a determined air.

Alexei watched him like a timid little rabbit. Dinner over, he took the guests to the library where logs were blazing in the fireplace, driving away the evening damp. Fedosia Ivanov-

na, who had not understood a word throughout dinner, stayed behind in the dining-room to see to things.

Cagliostro sat down in a leather armchair and between pinches of snuff held forth on the beneficial effects of a good digestion. The Countess seated herself on a small chair near the fireplace and gazed at the fire, deep in thought. Her hands, folded in her lap, sank in the blue silk of her gown.

"My friend, a doctor of philosophy who died in Nuremberg in fourteen... What a cursed memory," muttered Cagliostro, drumming his fingers on his snuffbox, "my friend, Doctor Bombastus Theophrastus Paracelsus, told me again and again: chew, chew, chew,—that is the first commandment of the wise: chew..."

Alexei glanced at him in puzzlement, but the very next moment, as it often happens in dreams, the inconceivable merged effortlessly with reality, he felt slightly dizzy for a moment as his mind took it in, but the dizziness passed at once.

"I, too, have often heard, Your Excellency, that a good digestion inspires happy thoughts and a poor digestion plunges one into sadness and even causes hypochondria," said Alexei. "However, there are other reasons besides..."

"Undoubtedly," said Cagliostro, lowering his eyebrows.

"I make so bold as to speak of myself as an example... It was the portrait over there that started my nervous distress..."

Cagliostro turned his head, looked the portrait up and down, and again lowered his eyebrows over his eyes.

And then Alexei told his guests the story of the portrait painted in France (this he had learnt from his aunt), and how he found it in the old house, and ended by pouring out all his feelings and hopeless desires which had brought on his hypochondria.

During the telling of the story he glanced at the Countess now and again. She was listening attentively. Alexei rose from his armchair and pointing at the portrait exclaimed:

"Only today I was telling Fedosia Ivanovna that if only I could meet Count Fenix I would persuade him to embody my dream, to bring the portrait alive, and after that—even if it cost me my life..."

A look of horror appeared in the Countess's blue eyes when he said this, she quickly dropped her head and again stared into the fire.

1478

"The materialization of emotional ideas," said Cagliostro, yawning and covering his mouth with a hand glittering with precious stones, "is one of the most difficult and dangerous tasks of our science... During the materialization, fatal defects of the idea that is being materialized are very often disclosed, and sometimes its utter uselessness too... However, I should like to ask our host to allow us to retire for an early night."

7

Alexei did not shut his eyes all night. At daybreak, he put on a robe, went down to the river and jumped into the water, invisible through the mist. On the surface it was lukewarm, but deep down it was icy. After the bathe, he got dressed, had his hair waved, drank some hot milk with honey, and went down into the garden—his thoughts were excited, and his head was afire.

The morning was humid and still. Blackbirds, looking worried, were running about the grass. A golden oriole was whistling as if it were blowing into a warbler. In the bluish mist hovering over the pool with the fountains playing at half strength, a dove was sobbing tenderly somewhere in the tall, spreading trees.

The walks had been washed clean and were still damp, and on one of them Alexei noticed the prints of a woman's feet. He followed them, and in a glade where the outlines of a round folly and the huge black poplars beside it stood out from the bluish mist, he saw the Countess. She was standing on the steps with drooping arms and listening to the cuckoo calling in the grove.

When he came closer his heart began to hammer, for tears were pouring down the young woman's face, and her bare shoulders were jerking. Startled by the sound of his footsteps, she turned round, gasped and ran, holding up her full skirt with both hands. However, at the pond she stopped and faced him. A blush suffused her cheeks, and tears stood in her frightened blue eyes. She quickly wiped them with a tiny handkerchief and smiled contritely.

"I frightened you, forgive me," said Alexei.

"No, oh no," she replied, tucked the handkerchief into the

low neck of her dress, and curtsied. Alexei kissed her hand politely. "The morning was so lovely, the cuckoo called so nicely, that I felt sad, and you gave me a fright." She walked beside Alexei along the shore. "Don't you feel sad when you see how lovely is God's world? You know, I was thinking about what you told us last night. You are living in such plenty, unattached. And young... But why, why is there no happiness?"

She stopped short and looked into his eyes. Alexei answered the first thing that came into his head—something about the coarseness of life and the impossibility of happiness. Saying this he gave her a wide smile and the smile remained on his lips.

As they continued their stroll and talked, he saw before him only her blue eyes—they seemed to be suffused with the morning's loveliness, he heard only the sound of her voice and the distant incessant calls of the cuckoo.

The Countess told him that she had been born in a village near Prague, she was an orphan, she was called Augusta, though her real name was Maria, that for three years now she had been travelling about the world with her husband, that what she had seen in that time was more than others saw in a lifetime, and that just now, in this morning mist, all her past flashed by before her mind's eye, and made her cry.

"I was married when I was a mere child, but during these three years my heart matured," she said, and again glanced gently and straight into Alexei's eyes. "I do not know you, but for some reason I trust you as if I've known you for a long time. You won't think ill of me for chattering, will you?"

He took her hand and, leaning low over it, kissed it several times, and at his last kiss her hand turned palm upward, pressed his lips lightly, and slipped away.

"Couldn't you have found a wife, could you not have fallen in love with a woman instead of some incorporeal dream or something?" Maria asked in a quivering voice. "You are inexperienced and naive... You don't know what a horror your dream is..."

She went to a stone seat and sat down. Alexei sat down beside her.

"But why a horror?" he asked. "What is so sinful in my dreaming of something that does not exist in life"?

"The more reason... On a morning like this you must not, you must not dream of something that cannot be," she said, and tears rose to her eyes again.

He moved closer to her and took her hand.

"I feel that you are unhappy..."

She nodded silently and quickly. She was touching like a little girl in her agitation. Alexei felt that she wanted with her whole heart and soul to draw his thoughts and emotions to her own self. His heart felt hot—a tenderness towards this woman swept over it like a gust of wind that, running through a field, causes the grass to lie low.

"Who makes you suffer?" he asked in a whisper.

And Maria replied hurriedly as if afraid to lose a minute of this conversation:

"I fear ... I hate my husband... He's a monster, the world has never seen his like... He tortures me... Oh, if you only knew... I have no one in the whole world... My love has been sought by many, but what is it to me... Not one of them asked me with sympathy whether my life was happy or not... You and I have barely met, and we have to part, but I shall forever remember this minute when you asked me..." her lips began to quiver, she was obviously mastering her shyness with a great effort, and suddenly she blushed furiously and said: "The moment I saw you my heart told me: trust him."

"Oh good God ... it's unbearable... I shall kill him!" cried Alexei, clenching the handle of his sword.

And in the next instant someone sneezed loudly behind them. Maria gave a feeble cry, like a bird. Alexei leapt to his feet and between the lime trees saw Cagliostro. He had on the same green overcoat and large-brimmed hat from which white ostrich feathers fell on his shoulders and back. Holding his snuff-box in his hand, he was making terrible faces with the next sneeze coming on. In the light of day his face seemed purple, for that is how full-blooded and swarthy he was.

Keeping his hand on the handle of his sword, Alexei glared at this extraordinary man. Cagliostro, changing his mind about sneezing, held out his snuff-box and said:

"Have a pinch."

Instinctively Alexei raised his hand, but gripped his sword handle again at once.

"Well, if you don't want to take a pinch, don't," said Cagliostro. "Countess, I've been looking for you all over the garden, my bag has been packed, but I have not touched your things." Turning to Alexei again, he said: "Well then, if our carriage has been repaired, we shall be on our way."

He offered an arm to Maria; meekly, without raising her head, she took her husband's arm, and they started towards the house walking along a path between tall grasses.

Alexei covered his face with his hands and sank down on the garden seat.

8

He sat thus for a long time in a trance, hearing neither the whistling of the birds nor the splashing of the fountains which the gardener had now turned full on. He stared at the sand under his feet and the bugs crawling about there. These were the flat red bugs each of which had a funny face painted on its back. Some crawled clutched together—one funny face next to another, while some crawled in and out of the crack in the hard-packed earth of the walk without any apparent need.

Alexei was thinking that the enchantment of the morning had wrecked his life. He could never go back now to the cosiness of his hopeless day-dreaming about ideal love: Maria's blue eyes, these twin blue rays, had reached into his heart and aroused it. Maria was going away and they would never meet again. Both dream and reality had been shattered—what other enchantments could he expect from life now?

Suddenly he remembered the crooked leer with which Cagliostro had offered him his snuff-box, and his blood boiled with fury. He sprang to his feet and, without knowing yet what he was going to do, but something resolute anyway, he pulled his hat down over his eyes and strode to the house.

In the door he was met by Fedosia Ivanovna.

"Alexis," she cried fretfully. "The blacksmith has just been and he told me, the rogue, that he simply could not get the Count's carriage fixed in less than two days from now."

The news that the guests were staying quite confused all Alexei's thoughts, he began to shiver as in a fever and his hands trembled. He went into the house with his aunt and sat down on a love-seat. Fedosia Ivanovna, unable to read his thoughts, asked him if in that case they should not send to the nearest village for more blacksmiths.

"Not on any account!" Alexei shouted. "Don't you dare send for any blacksmiths!" Then he smiled suddenly. "No, Fedosia Ivanovna, let our guests stay with us for another couple of days... Auntie, I don't suppose you understood who our guest was, right?"

"Some Fenin or something."

"That's the whole point—not Fenin, but Count Fenix—Cagliostro himself!"

Fedosia Ivanovna opened wide her eyes and fluttered her plump hands. Fedosia Ivanovna, however, was a Russian woman, and so the news that they had a famous sorcerer in the house impressed her on quite a different account, and she spat angrily.

"A heathen, with no cross on him, for mercy's sake," she said with disgust. "We'll have to wash all the crockery with holy water now, and have a service sung in all the rooms... A worry we could very well do without... And she, is she a sorceress too?"

"Yes, auntie, the Countess is a sorceress."

"Why then, I guess they need quite other food, those cursed magicians... Oh, Alexis... Maybe they can't eat our food, and you never guessed... Go and ask them what they want for breakfast..."

Alexei burst out laughing, and went to the library. There, lighting a pipe, he started walking up and down the room and suddenly clenched his teeth so hard on the tip of his pipe that the amber cracked.

"I shall challenge the Count to a duel, kill him, and flee abroad with Maria," he thought, and flung his pipe on to the window-sill. "What cause have I for the duel? Oh, never mind what..."

He drew his sword out of the sheath and examined the blade. "Can I challenge a guest though?" The floorboard

creaked at the back of the room where a dark-red curtain draped a niche. He quickly raised his head, but instantly forgot about the sound, for his thoughts were in a whirl. "No, I'll have to wait until they leave, overtake them beyond the river and there pick a quarrel with him." He stopped beside the window and, listening to the hammering of his heart, mentally reviewed the whole of his stroll with Maria, from the folly, along the shore of the pond, to the stone garden seat. "Oh darling," he whispered.

Breakfast was announced. Alexei awaited his guests in the dining-room. When he heard their footsteps he went dizzy for a moment. Maria walked in with lowered eyes, curtsied before Fedosia Ivanovna, and took her seat. Her face was pale and powdered, and the fire in her soul seemed to have been quenched. Cagliostro unfolded his napkin, silently gave Alexei an oblique glance, and throughout breakfast remained in a huff, chewing loudly and most unpleasantly. Fedosia Ivanovna gave Fimka her orders in a whisper, and did not eat a thing herself.

In vain Alexei tried with his hot glances to evoke a blush or even a barely perceptible movement in Maria's face: she sat like a waxen figure, and Alexei's hot glances invariably met her husband's keen, hard glances. And true to character, Alexei fell suddenly into despair.

Breakfast was over. Maria, never raising her eyes, retired to her room. Cagliostro expressed a desire to smoke a pipe with his host in the library, and stepped aside at the door to let him go in first.

Sprawling in the same armchair as he had done the night before, Cagliostro sucked wheezingly on his pipe for some time, glancing now and then from under his bushy eyebrows at Alexei who was moping at the window, and suddenly pronounced in a loud, imperative tone:

"I have thought it over and decided to carry out your wish tonight: I shall perform a perfect and complete materialization of Madame Tulupova's portrait."

Alexei gave him a startled look and ran his tongue over his parched lips. Cagliostro left his armchair and, taking a magnifying glass framed in silver from his pocket, peered at the portrait, clicking his tongue and wheezing.

Within an hour preparations were begun. Margadon took

down the portrait from the wall, dusted it carefully, set it against the wall and spread a carpet on the floor before it. All the things that would not be needed were carried out of the room, and the curtains were drawn across the windows. Alexei was ordered to undress and stay in bed until dusk without eating or drinking anything.

Alexei did everything he was told. Lying in his darkened bedroom, he felt only that his head was bound with hoops of lead. At five o'clock Cagliostro brought him an infusion of rhubarb and holly, and though the taste was awful he drank it up. At seven o'clock his bowels were evacuated. At eight, wearing a loose and light robe, he went, together with Cagliostro, into the library where wax candles were burning in candelabra before the portrait, brightly illumining it.

10

"Do not breathe too deeply or too lightly. Your breathing must go smoothly without any yawning, gurgling, coughing, panting or sneezing, for magnetic substance cannot stand jolts."

Thus spoke Cagliostro as he seated Alexei in a low armchair before the portrait. Drops of perspiration streamed from under his wig down his red face with the twitching eyebrows. As he moved about he did not stop talking for a minute, and gave Margadon his orders by signs.

The Ethiopian took several bunches of dried herbs from a box, put them in a copper bowl, set it down on a low table in front of Alexei, then took a sort of mandolin with a long finger-board out of its case, carried it into the back of the room, then went and brought a large, thin and obviously very strong net, stretched it out on his hands, and squatted on the floor near the door.

While he did all this, Cagliostro chalked a large circle on the floor near the armchair in which sat Alexei.

"I repeat," he said. "You must strain all your imagination and picture this person," he indicated the portrait with the chalk, "unveiled, that is naked... All the details of her body will depend on the power of your imagination... I recall in 1519 in Paris the duc de Guise asked me to materialize Ma-

dame de Sevignac who died from a gastric disease... I was not quick enough to warn the duc, he was too impatient, and Madame de Sevignac turned out to be something like a bag stuffed with straw under her dress... I lost eight thousand livres, and it took me a great deal of trouble to drive that enraged scarecrow back into the portrait. And so, when you have very meticulously pictured the body of your heart's desire, you must picture it fully dressed, and here you must proceed without haste for, as it happened in 1251 when at the request of the widow I called out the spirit of the deceased French king Louis the Bald, he appeared with only the front of his body clothed, while he was naked behind, which caused much amazement..." Straightening up and licking the chalk from his fingers, he said: "Margadon, go and call the Countess."

He stepped back a little, measured the circle with his eyes, then bent down again and, going round the circle, chalked on it the twelve signs of the zodiac, the twenty two signs of the cabbala, the keys and the gates, the four elements, the three beginnings, and the seven spheres. This done, he entered the circle.

"You shall have a perfect example of my art," he said importantly. "Her ability to speak, her digestion, all the bodily functions and sensitivity will be just like those in a person born by a woman."

He leaned over Alexei who lay like a corpse in his armchair, took his pulse, ordered him to close his eyes, and placed his hot, fat hand on his forehead. In this moment Alexei heard light steps and the rustle of silk. He knew that it was Maria who had come in, and moaned, making a desperate effort to break free of the terrible will of this man whose fingers were pressing down painfully on his eyeballs.

"Do not move, concentrate, follow my instructions... I begin," Cagliostro said imperatively, took a long stiletto from the little table, entered the circle and traced the great sign of Makropozopus. Standing inside the circle, he threw up his arms, and his deeply lined face with the drooping nose turned to stone.

Behind his back Alexei heard the sweet sounds of the mandolin.

"I am locked in. I am securely protected by all the signs,

I am strong. I order," spoke Cagliostro in a sing-song voice, which mounted and mounted in volume. "O spirits of the air, Sylphs, I call you in the name of the Inexpressible which is pronounced as the word Esha... Do what you must..."

Alexei stared at the candle-lit haughty face of Praskovia Pavlovna, proudly set on the tall neck. In that minute he remembered all the anguish of his dreamings, all the longing of his sleepless nights, and now her face, so beloved only yesterday, appeared frightening, hurtful, feverishly sallow like an illness. However, feeling that he should obey just the same, he looked down from the face to Praskovia Pavlovna's bared shoulders, and forced himself to picture her as told. The blood rushed to his face. He felt a stab of shame and a sharp pain in his chest.

When Cagliostro uttered the word Esha, the candle-flames began to waver, and a whiff of rancid air ran through the room. Alexei dug his fingers into the arms of his chair. Cagliostro continued in an ever stronger voice:

"Spirits of the earth, Gnomussi, I call you in the name of the Inexpressible which is pronounced as the syllable El. Do what you must."

He raised the stiletto and lowered it, and suddenly the whole house shook as from an earthquake, the crystal chandelier tinkled, doors banged everywhere in the house, the door of the book-case flew open and a book fell out. Cagliostro continued:

"Spirits of the waters, Nymphs, I call you in the name of the Inexpressible which is pronounced as the sound Ra... Come and do what you must..."

At these words Alexei heard the distant sound of the surf and never taking his eyes off Praskovia Pavlovna noticed to his horror that her features were becoming hazy and elusive...

"Spirits of the fire," Cagliostro now spoke in a thunderous voice. "The mighty and the willful, I call you in the name of the Inexpressible which is pronounced as the letter Y. Spirits of the fire, Salamanders, I call you and adjure you with the sign of Solomon to obey and do what you must..." He raised both arms and strained upward on tiptoe in extreme tension. "Do what you must according to the laws of nature, without

digressing from the form, without mocking and without breach of your obedience to me..."

Whereupon, a soundless, dancing flame ran round the carved frame, it was so bright that the candle-flames blushed, and all of a sudden blinding rays of light started from Praskovia Pavlovna's image. The herbs in the copper bowl caught fire. Maria's voice, quavering and feeble, sang something not Russian behind Alexei.

But before she had finished singing, Alexei cried out wildly: Praskovia Pavlovna, freeing herself, released her head from the canvas and unsealed her lips.

"Give me your hand," she said in a thin, cold and spiteful voice.

In the ensuing silence, Alexei heard the mandolin fall on the floor with a thump, Maria's quick sigh, and Cagliostro's wheezing breath.

"Give me your hand, I said, and I shall be free," said Praskovia Pavlovna.

"Your hand, give her your hand!" cried Cagliostro.

As in a trance Alexei went to the portrait. Praskovia Pavlovna quickly thrust out her small hand and gripped Alexei's with cold, dry fingers. He sprang back and she, pulled along by him, stepped out of the portrait and jumped down on to the carpet.

This was a thin, very beautiful and posturing woman of the medium height. Her movements were somewhat erratic like the flight of a bat. She ran up to the pier-glass and, looking at herself this way and that, spoke as she patted her hair in place:

"Surprising... Was I asleep or what? What a sallow colour! And my gown all crumpled... The cut is funny too, too tight in the chest... Oh dear, I can't remember rightly... I've forgotten... (And she rubbed her eyes.) I've forgotten everything..."

Holding up her full skirt with the tips of her fingers, she walked up and down the room, and then brought her dark, lustreless eyes to rest on Alexei. Slowly she smiled, revealing her small, sharp teeth and pale gums, and took his arm.

"You look at me so strangely, you frighten me," she said with a coy little laugh, and drew him to the balcony door. "We must have a talk."

When they left the room, Cagliostro hugged himself under his fur-lined overcoat and laughed.

"That was an excellent cadaver," he said, his whole body shaking with laughter. Then, he turned on his heels and, no longer laughing, fixed his stare on Maria. "Crying, are you?" She quickly brushed away her tears and, rising from her chair, stood before her husband with lowered head. "Even this has not convinced you of my enormous power over dead and living nature, isn't it so?" Without lifting her head Maria glanced at her husband with obstinate hatred. The fright she had gone through and the aversion she felt distorted her sweet face. "And your Prince Charming chose to find consolation with that nauseating cadaver and not you."

"You will answer for practising black magic on Judgement Day," Maria said in a low yet firm voice.

At this Cagliostro turned quite purple, pulled his hands out from under his overcoat, and glowered at her ferociously from under his bushy eyebrows. Maria, however, stood perfectly still before him, and he said with utmost unctuousness:

"For three years, madam, I have been patiently waiting for your love without resorting to any art at all, while you have nothing but escape on your ungrateful little mind. You should not let my patience run thin."

"You have no power over my love anyway," Maria retorted. "You can't make me love you..."

"Yes, I can." Maria smirked at this, and instantly the blood rushed to his eyes. "I shall seal you into a little phial, madam, and carry you about in my pocket."

"Just the same you have no power over my love," Maria repeated. "If I survive I'll give my love to another man, never to you."

"This time you've said too much," muttered Cagliostro and snatched up the stiletto from the table, but in the nick of time Margadon, who until then had been standing motionless behind his back, sprang forward and caught hold of his hand with amazing agility. Cagliostro growled, hit Margadon on the face with his left hand, flung away the stiletto, noisily exhaled a chestful of air and strode out of the room.

12

Alexei with the thing that had a likeness to a woman and was addressed as Praskovia Pavlovna by him, walked along the path across the lawn to the ponds. The air was damp. The moon had risen over the garden, and its greyish light illumined the whole of the wide lawn. Spider webs, already stretched by their busy weavers, glinted here and there in the dark-blue grass. The flowers made whitish blots, a copious dew had fallen and the drops sparkled prettily. In the distance beyond the ponds the vapour rose in a silvery halo.

Alexei walked without speaking, clenching his teeth and staring under his feet. Praskovia Pavlovna talked without a pause as she looked at the silver ball of the moon hanging over the lush greenery.

"Ah, the moon, the moon! Alexis, how insensitive you are to this magic!"

The words her cold thin voice dropped were like bits of glass, the swish of her silk skirt scraped at Alexei's nerves unbearably with its whistling sound, making him clench his teeth. His heart felt like a heavy lump of ice. It did not surprise him that walking arm in arm with him was something which an hour ago had lived only in his imagination. This jabbering, posturing creature in the full-skirted gown with a narrow bodice, pale-faced from the moonlight with deep shadows in the eye hollows, seemed as incorporeal to him as his dream. And in vain he told himself again and again: "Gratify your desire, come on, she's yours to enjoy..."—he simply could not overcome his aversion.

When they came to the pond and the stone seat on which that morning he had talked with Maria, he asked Praskovia Pavlovna if she would not care to sit down. She sat down at once, flaring her skirt about her.

"Alexis," she whispered, smiling widely at the moon. "Alexis, you are sitting with a lady so unfeelingly. After all, you should know how pleasant boldness is for a woman."

He replied through set teeth:

"If you knew how I dreamed of you you would not rebuke me."

"Rebuke you?" She laughed, and it sounded like bits of glass scattered on the ground. "Rebuke you indeed, when all

you do is press my hands, and that very weakly too. You might at least take me in your arms."

Alexei raised his head, peered at her and his heart quavered. He put his right arm round her shoulders, and in his left hand he took both her hands. In the low-cut gown he could see her chest with the slightly protruding collar-bones breathing calmly and evenly. He brought his face close to hers, trying to recapture the enchantment it had had for him.

"My dream," he said with anguish. She drew away from him slightly, smiling and shaking her head, and then looked straight into his eyes with her transparent eyes that glittered like dots of moonlight. "You feel elusive as a dream..."

"Hold me tighter then," she said.

He crushed her with all his might and kissed her on her cool lips, and she responded with such unexpected and urgent eagerness that he instantly sprang back: repugnance, loathing and horror made his gore rise.

Stretching languidly and all but purring, she said after a while:

"It's damp here, and I want to eat."

Alexei got up quickly and started for the house. When he heard the swish of her silk skirts behind him, he walked faster and even changed to a run, but Praskovia Pavlovna caught up with him at once, and hung on his arm.

"Alexis, you're such a very difficult person!"

"Look here," he shouted, stopping. "We'd better part, don't you think?"

"No, I don't think so at all," she replied, looking up into his face. "I like being with you."

"But I think you loathsome, can't you understand?" He gave his arm a jerk to break free of her hold and ran, but she clung fast to his hand and flew after him down the path.

"I don't believe you, I don't believe you, you did say yourself that I was your dream..."

"Will you let me be or not?"

"Never, *mon cher*, not until I die!"

Thus, holding hands, they flew into the house. Alexei collapsed into an easy chair, while she stood before him, fanning herself and looking buoyant.

"I shall have to work very, very hard, my dear, to curb your temper... You are selfish, you know." She folded her fan, per-

ched on the arm of his chair, and said: "Darling, I terribly want something all the time, I don't know if I'm hungry or thirsty... At moments I feel as if cold water was trickling down my body..."

Alexei leapt out of the chair, and gave the beaded tassel of the bell-rope a vigorous tug.

"You'll be brought food, water, anything you want, so don't worry."

Fedosia Ivanovna's soft steps were heard in response to the bell ringing somewhere in the back rooms.

13

Blocking the half-open door with his body, Alexei asked his aunt to order some food to be brought to the library. Fedosia Ivanovna gave her nephew a strangely searching look, silently pushed him out of her way, walked into the room and saw a skinny—as she afterwards told it—dark-haired woman, not really a woman but a dead moth more like—standing there, twirling her fan, and looking at her piercingly.

Fedosia Ivanovna's mouth fell open and her knees all but gave way.

"*Theodosie*, don't you know me, *ma chère*?" asked the dark-haired one in a squeaky voice.

Fedosia Ivanovna felt her legs folding up as she stared at the empty portrait frame on the wall. When Praskovia Pavlovna came a step closer to her, she quickly raised her arm and made the sign of the cross.

"Come, auntie, what's there to be afraid of," said Alexei with something like exasperation. "It's all very simple: this lady is the product of Count Fenix's sorcery, do go and see about the food..."

Wincing as from heartburn, he went to the door opening into the garden and, leaning against the doorframe, gazed at the moonlit lawn. He heard his aunt mumbling a prayer, then dashing off in her Mother Goose waddle, Praskovia Pavlovna snickering spitefully in her wake, and a panicky running-about and whispering starting in the house. He did not look round, though, and gazed miserably at the lighted windows of the guest wing.

The tinkle of glasses and crockery sounded in the room—that was Fimka laying the small table, setting down the plates and dishes and probably casting horrified looks over her shoulder all the time.

Praskovia Pavlovna sat down at the table and asked Fimka:

"Slavewoman, what's in that dish?"

"Mushrooms, mistress."

"I'll have some."

Fimka served her the mushrooms and then stood behind her chair, and covered her mouth with her apron. Praskovia Pavlovna ate the mushrooms and ordered Fimka to give her some chicken noodle soup.

"Your serving manners are atrocious," said Praskovia Pavlovna, as Fimka set down the plate before her. "You may be a village wench, but your serving manners should be genteel."

"I'll try to please, mistress."

"Curtsy when you are speaking to your mistress!" said Praskovia Pavlovna, glaring at the poor girl with her dark eyes. Suddenly she banged her soup spoon on the table. "Curtsy, slavewoman! Bend your right leg... Don't wobble to left or right, keep a straight back... Pick up your skirt... Smile... Sweetly, more sweetly!"

Alexei watched this scene with loathing.

"Leave the girl alone," he said at last. "Fimka, go."

Still holding the soup spoon in her hand, Praskovia Pavlovna looked round at him in amazement, and shrugged a shoulder.

"Alexis, *mon cher*, I am the mistress here, it's not you who gives the orders. I shall have that wench flogged so she'll be quicker to learn..."

The blood rushed to his head, but he controlled his fury and went out into the garden.

14

His hands stuffed into the pockets of his coat, Alexei walked across the lawn, his hose getting soaked up to the knees in the dew. Schemes, one madder than the other, were born in his head. Escape? Jump into the pond? Kill her? Kill the Count? Kill himself? But these schemes were like sparks

that went out at once—he felt that he was doomed, that the cursed creature had him in its web like a spider, and who could tell what other frightening powers it possessed?

"It was all my own, my own doing," he muttered. "I myself wanted my dream, I wanted the fantasy of my sleepless nights to come alive... We built up her body with horrible black magic... The most febrile of imaginations could never have thought up such nastiness..."

He stopped and mopped the cold sweat on his brow. "But what if it's only a bad dream? I'll pinch myself and wake up in my clean bed in the morning... I'll see that pretty little meadow, the white geese, a peasant girl with a rake..."

In utter misery he shook his head and raised his eyes. The moon was high above the garden, its light muted by hazy little clouds. The dismal croaking of the frogs reached him from the river...

Suddenly, the silence of the garden was shattered by Praskovia Pavlovna's thin, shrill voice calling "Alexis! Alexis!" He stamped his foot in annoyance. Going to her in response to her call was out of the question, and running away was shameful. And now he saw three figures coming towards him: Margadon, Cagliostro and Praskovia Pavlovna. She reached him first and cried spitefully:

"I know everything, my good sir! I thought your preoccupied look and your impudent talk was all part of a love game, but now I see that you have another woman on your mind! I won't have another woman anywhere near me, you hear?"

"Oh for shame, for shame!" said Cagliostro as he approached Alexei. "I toiled in the sweat of my brow for you, and you turn your nose away from her!"

"You fickle lover," shrieked Praskovia Pavlovna. "I'll have you chained to the wall in the basement!"

"No, madam, chaining him to the wall won't do," objected Cagliostro. "As for you, sir, don't be so mulish, it's time to go home—the lady wants to sleep, and going to bed all by herself will distress her."

The inertia he felt before took hold of him again, he sighed and shuffled homewards, pulled along by Praskovia Pavlovna, hanging on his arm. They were almost at the door into the library when he turned round and saw a woman's shadow on the curtain of the guest wing. He tried to break free of Pras-

kovia's clutch and shouted "Maria!" but he was gripped from behind by Margadon who pushed him into the room and locked the door behind him.

Alexei had given that shout because the scales seemed to fall from his eyes and he understood in what lay his salvation. Left tête-à-tête with Praskovia Pavlovna, he lit his pipe, sat down on a rung of the step-ladder and pretended to be listening. She threatened to keep him chained to the wall till he rotted, she screamed that the whole household was against her, that in the morning she would throw out Fedosia Ivanovna's junk, tear out Fimka's hair with her own hands, have all the servants flogged, and establish her own rule in the house...

Alexei waited for the screaming to tire her, but her anger showed no signs of abating. He listened but did not hear her—his heart was hammering so. He decided to take action. He knocked out his pipe, stood up and took a stretch.

"Those are all small things," he said, yawning. "Let's go to bed."

Praskovia Pavlovna immediately broke off her stream of words and her parched lips parted in a smile of happy surprise. Alexei took the candelabrum with lighted candles from the table and drew back the curtain screening the alcove, inviting Praskovia Pavlovna to go in first. The moment she had gone in, he held the candelabrum close to the curtain and the crimson velvet caught fire at once.

"Fire!" Alexei shouted in a voice that did not sound like his own, threw down the candelabrum and started running along the gallery leading to the guest wing.

Only once he paused and, turning round, saw Praskovia Pavlovna pulling down the blazing curtain with her skinny hands, emitting frightened cries as she did so. When he heard voices and the thudding of feet at the far end of the gallery, he darted to the nearest window and flattened himself against the wall of the deep niche.

15

Margadon, his robe streaming behind him, and Cagliostro wearing a night cap, a long patterned nightgown and no trousers, ran past him with frightened cries. They disappeared

behind the turning in the gallery whence thick smoke came pouring out. And then Alexei dashed to the guest wing, and saw Maria standing in the door opening into the garden. She was fully dressed and had a white shawl draped on her shoulders. Alexei jumped out into the garden from the window in the gallery and ran to her.

"Maria, just say the word," he said, folding his hands on his chest. "Wait... If it's no, then it's all up with me... If it's yes, I live, I shall live forever... Tell me—do you love me?"

With a small cry, she raised her arms, put them round Alexei's neck, and throwing back her head, looking into his eyes through her tears, said: "I love you."

And when she had spoken these words, he came out of the spell, his heart thawed out, the blood ran hotly and noisily in his veins, joyfully he drew in a breath of the scented night's air and of Maria's fragrant young body, cupped her weeping face in his hands and kissed her on the eyes.

"Maria, run down this walk to the pond and wait for me in the folly. When you have crossed the little bridge don't forget to give the chain a tug, and it will be raised... You will be perfectly safe there."

She nodded to say that she understood, picked up her skirts and started briskly down the path, turning round once to smile at him happily before she vanished in the thick darkness of the trees.

Alexei drew his sword then and rushed back into the house.

He knocked Fimka off her feet, resolutely pushed away Fedosia Ivanovna who tried to hold on to his arm, elbowed his way through the crowd of frightened servants, and flew into the library. The room was full of smoke. The five candles in the twin candelabrum with their smoking little tongues of flame barely illumined the books scattered all over the floor from the book-case which had toppled over, Margadon who was stamping the smouldering carpet, and Cagliostro crouching beside an arm-chair in which sat a cringing creature whose body with protruding dark ribs was barely covered with the tatters of her burnt gown. On seeing Alexei, the creature hissed, leapt to its feet and rushed towards him. He uttered a shout, thrust his sword forward and the creature, with a wail of despair and fury, sprang back from the menacing blade, ran to the back of the room and disappeared behind the book-cases.

Cagliostro, now barricaded by the armchair, was making some signs to Margadon, who stopped stamping the carpet and began to steal up to Alexei pulling his dagger out from behind his belt. Alexei, however, forestalling the man's leap, himself made a lunge with the sword in his outstretched arm, and it pierced Margadon's shoulder, buried in his flesh to half its length. Margadon gave a grunt, gasped for air with his open mouth, and fell on his back. And then Cagliostro threw the armchair at Alexei, and whirled about the room with a nimbleness amazing for his age and his girth, ducking behind various objects and throwing them. Alexei ran about the room after him, trying to hit him with his sword, but Cagliostro managed to slip out into the gallery, from there he jumped out into the garden from the very first open window he came to, and kicking up his bare legs in large leaps made for the ponds.

Alexei only caught up with him at the little bridge leading to the folly where Maria's white gown made a pale blur between the columns. With a growl Cagliostro started up the bridge, but coming to the edge, with the other half raised, he flung up his arms and with a heavy splash fell into the water. Maria's faint cry was heard. Moonlit ripples appeared on the water, and a frightened bird flew low over the grass with a lingering whistling call. All was still once more: not a sound was heard either on the pond or in the dark thickets.

Alexei stepped on to the bridge and peered down. Suddenly he saw a pair of eyes at the very pile supporting the structure, and these eyes slowly winked. Now he made out Cagliostro's upraised face, bristly skull and ugly ears.

"That pile is slippery and you won't be able to climb out anyway," he said to Cagliostro. "And I'm warning you, if you start anything again I'll stab you with my sword. You're a scoundrel. So better sit there quietly, you'll be pulled out just now." Cupping his hands round his mouth he shouted: "Hey, come here someone, here!" Very soon voices were heard in the distance, and people came running—youngsters, servant men and wenches, some armed with pitchforks, some with scythes, and some simply with clubs. All of them had been roused from their beds and were tousled from sleep.

Alexei ordered the men to fetch ropes, tie up Cagliostro and pull him out of the water. Three hefty men went down

into the water, first taking off their pants and crossing themselves. A tussle started under the bridge between the piles.

"Master, he's scratching, damn him," one of he rescuers called out.

"Grab him by the jowls and pull him out," men shouted from the bridge.

Finally, Cagliostro was tied up with ropes and hauled out. The fight had gone out of him and, with drooping head, teeth chattering from the cold, and wet shirt sticking to his body, he tramped towards the house in the crowd of servants.

When everyone had gone, Alexei started calling Maria, first softly, and then in an ever louder voice, more and more tinged with fear. She did not respond. He then ran round the pond, jumped into an old boat he found there and poled himself across to the island. Maria was lying on the wooden floor of the folly. Alexei put his arms round her, raised her up, held close her helplessly drooping head, and kissed her face, all but weeping from love and pity for her. At last he felt her body growing lighter, she raised her head and cushioned it snugly on his chest. And without opening her eyes she whispered:

"Do not desert me."

16

The fire was put out. Only the library had suffered: fire and water had ruined a great number of books and things in it, and nothing remained of the canvas on which Praskovia Pavlovna's portrait had been painted.

At daybreak, a cart was brought to the front porch, and on the fresh hay it was carpeted with the servants placed the luggage of the guests and then seated Margadon who was in a very bad way: his face was quite ashen, his mouth hung open, and he had two shawls wound round his head. The people crowding round the cart and standing at the porch felt sorry for the poor old chap—he was another servant, after all, he had come to grief through no fault of his own. The dairy woman gave him a baked egg to eat on the way. But then when Cagliostro was brought out of the house, still bound with ropes, wearing his wig, stuck lopsidedly on his head, his hat with the now tousled feathers, and his fur-lined greatcoat

flung over his nightgown, the youngsters began to whistle, the women to spit, and Spiridon, a purblind peasant—hatless, barefoot, his coat unbelted—who had bustled more than anyone else all night for the master to notice, sprang at Cagliostro, swung out an arm to give him a good cuff, but was pulled back in time. Cagliostro got into the cart unaided, his bushy eyebrows hooding his eyes. A fat-faced young chap, famed in the village for his strength and his recklessness, jumped cheerfully on to the driver's seat, wound the rope reins round his wrist, the old grey mare pushed her head into the horse-collar, and the cart moved off to the accompaniment of the servants' whistling and whooping.

"Fedka," Alexei shouted to the driver from the front porch, "take them straight to Smolensk, and there hand them over to the police."

"I sure will!" Fedka shouted back. "I'll hand them over all in one piece, it's not the first time."

17

After her fainting fit in the folly, Maria was barely able to walk back to the house. She was put to bed in the bedroom kept for especially honoured guests. The drapes were drawn across the windows, the bed-curtain was folded back, and she fell asleep. She slept till noon. Fedosia Ivanovna, who came up to the door every now and again, heard her muttering, so she went in and found Maria lying in bed with her eyes closed, bright-red spots on her cheeks, and muttering something without a pause in a low voice. The illness kept her hovering between life and death for a whole month.

Alexei almost went out of his mind with fright, and that same day he galloped off to Smolensk to fetch a doctor. On the way back he learnt from this doctor that two foreigners had been brought to the police in a cart; first thing they were arrested, and then despatched on the way to Warsaw with great pomp and ceremony.

After examining Maria, the doctor said that it would be one of two things: either the fever would defeat the patient, or the patient would get the better of the fever.

Alexei stayed at Maria's bedside all the time now; at night

he dozed in an easy chair beside the window; he hardly ate at all, he grew terribly thin—his face became manlier, his eyes limpid, and a white strand appeared in his chestnut hair.

Once, towards evening, he was dozing in his easy chair. Through the peach-coloured curtains the sun had stretched its long rays into the room with motes of dust dancing in them, and a sleepy fly was beating against the window-pane. Unglueing his eyelids with an effort, he glanced now at the motes, now at the fly. The clock on the mantlepiece calmly ticked off the minutes of life. And suddenly, through his drowziness, Alexei became aware of some change in everything, he shifted round in his chair, looked at the bed and saw that Maria's blue eyes were wide open. She was looking at him and wrinkling up her face very comically from amazement and the effort to remember. He fell on his knees beside the bed.

"Please tell me where am I and who are you?" she asked. Too overcome to utter a word, Alexei gently took her hand and pressed his lips to it. "I've been watching you dozing for a long time," Maria continued. "You had such a sad face, like someone near and dear to me," she wrinkled up her face again, and gave up trying to remember. "Now, if you opened the window it would be very nice."

Alexei pulled apart the curtains, opened the window, and the merry whistling and singing of birds poured into the bedroom together with the warm and scented air. Colour appeared in Maria's cheeks. She listened to the jolly sounds with a smile, and then she heard a late cuckoo calling three times. Tears rose to her eyes. Alexei bent over her and she whispered:

"Thank you for everything..."

Soon she fell fast asleep and slept for a long time. Her convalescence began, and Alexei could no longer spend the nights in her bedroom.

Fedosia Ivanovna alone clearly understood the situation which Maria's recovery had brought about. She and Alexei could not stay apart for a minute, but when they were together neither said a word: Maria brooded, and Alexei frowned, bit his lips, and stood or sat in the most uncomfortable attitudes imaginable.

Once his aunt broached the subject with him.

"Forgive me for being indiscreet, Alexis, but just what are your plans for Maria? Are you going to send her back to her husband, or what?"

Alexei cried furiously:

"Maria is no wife to her husband. Her home is here. And if she doesn't want to see me, I can go away, I can join the army and let the bullets find their mark!"

His nights were wretched: he had terrible nightmares, they strangled him, they choked the breath out of his body. He got up in the morning feeling all done in and until Maria awakened he wandered sullenly about the house, but the moment he heard her voice his bad mood evaporated, he hurried to her and gazed at her with tortured, sunken eyes.

It was August now. Myriads of stars came out and glimmered in the ponds, while the Milky Way appeared as a pale, hazy cloud. The smell of damp leaves came from the garden. Gone were the birds.

On one such night, Alexei and Maria were sitting in her bedroom in front of the fireplace, gazing at the little lights that ran up and down the smouldering log. And suddenly, in the semi-darkness, a shadow appeared from the draped alcove at the far end of the room. Startled, Alexei peered hard at the shadow. Maria also raised her head. Slowly, the shadow vanished. A minute of dead silence passed. Maria threw her arms round Alexei, pressed close to him and repeated in a desperate voice:

"You're mine... You're mine..."

In that minute, all the obstacles to their love—imaginary, complex, and unsurmountable—dissipated like smoke, blown away by the wind. There were only lips, pressed to lips, eyes gazing into eyes, the happiness of love, perhaps short-lived, perhaps sad—who could measure it?

MIKHAIL BULGAKOV



Mikhail Bulgakov (1891-1940) was born in Kiev into the family of a teacher at a religious academy, endured the hardships of wars and revolutions, starved, became a playwright for the country's finest theatre, knew fame, persecution, public ovations and forced muteness. His best works, including the famous *The Master and Margarita*, were not published until after his death. His dramas were struck off the repertoire—*The Days of the Turbins* at the Moscow Arts Theatre and his plays about Molière and Pushkin. During his lifetime, not a single major anthology of his short stories was ever published.

Bulgakov's works have since been recognised as classics; his books have been published in all the languages of the civilised world, studies of him have reached the four-figure mark and the number is still rising; editions of his books in the USSR have run into millions. He has won the highest praise from Gabriel Garcia Marquez of Columbia and Kendzaburo Oe of Japan. Kirghiz writer Chinghiz Aitmatov looks on Bulgakov as his teacher.

Mikhail Bulgakov's books have at last come into their own with their wild fantasy and their prophetic ideas about man and humanity. Our collection includes one of his most vivid stories, "The Fateful Eggs".

THE FATEFUL EGGS

CHAPTER I

Professor Persikov's Curriculum Vitae

On the evening of 16 April, 1928, the Zoology Professor of the Fourth State University and Director of the Moscow Zoological Institute, Persikov, went into his laboratory at the Zoological Institute in Herzen Street. The Professor switched on the frosted ceiling light and looked around him.

This ill-fated evening must be regarded as marking the beginning of the appalling catastrophe, just as Professor Vladimir Ipatievich Persikov must be seen as the prime cause of the said catastrophe.

He was fifty-eight years old. With a splendid bald head, like

a pestle, and tufts of yellowish hair sticking out at the sides. His face was clean-shaven, with a slightly protruding lower lip which gave it a slightly cantankerous expression. Tall and round-shouldered, he had small bright eyes and tiny old-fashioned spectacles in silver frames on a red nose. He spoke in a grating, high, croaking voice and one of his many idiosyncrasies was to crook the index finger of his right hand and screw up his eyes, whenever he was saying something weighty and authoritative. And since he always spoke authoritatively, because his knowledge in his field was quite phenomenal, the crooked finger was frequently pointed at those with whom the Professor was conversing. Outside his field, that is, zoology, embriology, anatomy, botany and geography, however, Professor Persikov said almost nothing at all.

Professor Persikov did not read the newspapers or go to the theatre. His wife had run away with a tenor from the Zimin opera in 1913, leaving him a note which read as follows:

"Your frogs make me shudder with intolerable loathing. I shall be unhappy all my life because of them."

The Professor did not marry again and had no children. He was short-tempered, but did not bear grudges, liked cloudberry tea and lived in Prechistenka Street in a flat with five rooms, one of which was occupied by the old housekeeper, Maria Stepanovna, who looked after the Professor like a nanny.

In 1919 three of the Professor's five rooms were taken away. Whereupon he announced to Maria Stepanovna:

"If they don't stop this outrageous behaviour, I shall leave the country, Maria Stepanovna."

Had the Professor carried out this plan, he would have experienced no difficulty in obtaining a place in the zoology department of any university in the world, for he was a really first-class scholar, and in the particular field which deals with amphibians had no equal, with the exception of professors William Weckle in Cambridge and Giacomo Bartolomeo Beccari in Rome. The Professor could read four languages, as well as Russian, and spoke French and German like a native. Persikov did not carry out his intention of going abroad, and 1920 was even worse than 1919. All sorts of things happened, one after the other. Bolshaya Nikitskaya was renamed Herzen Street. Then the clock on the wall of the corner building

in Herzen Street and Mokhovaya stopped at a quarter past eleven and, finally, unable to endure the perturbations of this remarkable year, eight magnificent specimens of tree-frogs died in the Institute's terrariums, followed by fifteen ordinary toads and an exceptional specimen of the Surinam toad.

Immediately after the demise of the toads which devastated that first order of amphibians rightly called tailless, old Vlas, the Institute's caretaker of many years' standing, who did not belong to any order of amphibians, also passed on to a better world. The cause of his death, incidentally, was the same as that of the unfortunate amphibians, and Persikov diagnosed it at once:

"Undernourishment!"

The scientist was perfectly right. Vlas should have been fed with flour and the toads with flour weevils, but the disappearance of the former determined that of the latter likewise, and Persikov tried to shift the twenty surviving specimens of tree-frogs onto a diet of cockroaches, but then the cockroaches disappeared too, thereby demonstrating their hostile attitude to war communism. Consequently, these last remaining specimens also had to be thrown into the rubbish pits in the Institute yard.

The effect of these deaths on Persikov, particularly that of the Surinam toad, is quite indescribable. For some reason he blamed them entirely on the People's Commissar for Education.

Standing in his fur cap and galoshes in the corridor of the freezing Institute, Persikov said to his assistant Ivanov, an elegant gentleman with a fair pointed beard:

"Hanging's too good for him, Pyotr Stepanovich! What do they think they're doing! They'll ruin the whole Institute! Eh? An exceptionally rare male specimen of *Pipa americana*, thirteen centimetres long..."

Things went from bad to worse. When Vlas died the Institute windows froze so hard that there were icy scrolls on the inside of the panes. The rabbits, foxes, wolves and fish died, as well as every single grass-snake. Persikov brooded silently for days on end, then caught pneumonia, but did not die. When he recovered, he started coming to the Institute twice a week and in the round hall, where for some reason it was always five degrees below freezing point irrespective of the temperature

outside, he delivered a cycle of lectures on "The Reptiles of the Torrid Zone" in galoshes, a fur cap with ear-flaps and a scarf, breathing out white steam, to an audience of eight. The rest of the time he lay under a rug on the divan in Prechistenka, in a room with books piled up to the ceiling, coughing, gazing into the jaws of the fiery stove which Maria Stepanovna stoked with gilt chairs, and remembering the Surinam toad.

But all things come to an end. So it was with 'twenty and 'twenty-one, and in 'twenty-two a kind of reverse process began. Firstly, in place of the dear departed Vlas there appeared Pankrat, a young, but most promising zoological caretaker, and the Institute began to be heated again a little. Then in the summer with Pankrat's help Persikov caught fourteen common toads. The terrariums came to life again... In 'twenty-three Persikov gave eight lectures a week, three at the Institute and five at the University, in 'twenty-four thirteen a week, not including the ones at workers' schools, and in the spring of 'twenty-five distinguished himself by failing no less than seventy-six students, all on amphibians.

"What, you don't know the difference between amphibians and reptilia?" Persikov asked. "That's quite ridiculous, young man. Amphibia have no kidneys. None at all. So there. You should be ashamed of yourself. I expect you're a Marxist, aren't you?"

"Yes," replied the devastated student, faintly.

"Well, kindly retake the exam in the autumn," Persikov said politely and shouted cheerfully to Pankrat: "Send in the next one!"

Just as amphibians come to life after a long drought, with the first heavy shower of rain, so Professor Persikov revived in 1926 when a joint Americano-Russian company built fifteen fifteen-storey apartment blocks in the centre of Moscow, beginning at the corner of Gazetny Lane and Tverskaya, and 300 workers' cottages on the outskirts, each with eight apartments, thereby putting an end once and for all to the terrible and ridiculous accommodation shortage which made life such a misery for Muscovites from 1919 to 1925.

In fact, it was a marvellous summer in Persikov's life, and occasionally he would rub his hands with a quiet, satisfied giggle, remembering how he and Maria Stepanovna had been cooped up in two rooms. Now the Professor had received all

five back, spread himself, arranged his two-and-a-half thousand books, stuffed animals, diagrams and specimens, and lit the green lamp on the desk in his study.

You would not have recognised the Institute either. They painted it cream, equipped the amphibian room with a special water supply system, replaced all the plate glass with mirrors and donated five new microscopes, glass laboratory tables, some 2,000-amp. arc lights, reflectors and museum cases.

Persikov came to life again, and the whole world suddenly learnt of this when a brochure appeared in December 1926 entitled "More About the Reproduction of Polyplacophora or Chitons", 126 pp, *Proceedings of the Fourth University.*

And in the autumn of 1927 he published a definitive work of 350 pages, subsequently translated into six languages, including Japanese. It was entitled "The Embryology of Pipae, Spadefoots and Frogs", price 3 roubles. State Publishing House.

But in the summer of 1928 something quite appalling happened...

CHAPTER II

A Coloured Tendril

So, the Professor switched on the light and looked around. Then he turned on the reflector on the long experimental table, donned his white coat, and fingered some instruments on the table...

Of the thirty thousand mechanical carriages that raced around Moscow in 'twenty-eight many whizzed down Herzen Street, swishing over the smooth paving-stones, and every few minutes a 16, 22, 48 or 53 tram would career round the corner from Herzen Street to Mokhovaya with much grinding and clanging. A pale and misty crescent moon cast reflections of coloured lights through the laboratory windows and was visible far away and high up beside the dark and heavy dome of the Church of Christ the Saviour.

But neither the moon nor the Moscow spring bustle were of the slightest concern to the Professor. He sat on his three-legged revolving stool turning with tobacco-stained fingers

the knob of a splendid Zeiss microscope, in which there was an ordinary unstained specimen of fresh amoebas. At the very moment when Persikov was changing the magnification from five to ten thousand, the door opened slightly, a pointed beard and leather bib appeared, and his assistant called:

"I've set up the mesentery, Vladimir Ipatych. Would you care to take a look?"

Persikov slid quickly down from the stool, letting go of the knob midway, and went into his assistant's room, twirling a cigarette slowly in his fingers. There, on the glass table, a half-suffocated frog stiff with fright and pain lay crucified on a cork mat, its transparent micaceous intestines pulled out of the bleeding abdomen under the microscope.

"Very good," said Persikov, peering down the eye-piece of the microscope.

He could obviously detect something very interesting in the frog's mesentery, where live drops of blood were racing merrily along the vessels as clear as daylight. Persikov quite forgot about his amoebas. He and Ivanov spent the next hour-and-a-half taking turns at the microscope and exchanging animated remarks, quite incomprehensible to ordinary mortals.

At last Persikov dragged himself away, announcing:

"The blood's coagulating, it can't be helped."

The frog's head twitched painfully and its dimming eyes said clearly: "Bastards, that's what you are..."

Stretching his stiff legs, Persikov got up, returned to his laboratory, yawned, rubbed his permanently inflamed eyelids, sat down on the stool and looked into the microscope, his fingers about to move the knob. But move it he did not. With his right eye Persikov saw the cloudy white plate and blurred pale amoebas on it, but in the middle of the plate sat a coloured tendril, like a female curl. Persikov himself and hundreds of his students had seen this tendril many times before but taken no interest in it, and rightly so. The coloured streak of light merely got in the way and indicated that the specimen was out of focus. For this reason it was ruthlessly eliminated with a single turn of the knob, which spread an even white light over the plate. The zoologist's long fingers had already tightened on the knob, when suddenly they trembled and let go. The reason for this was Persikov's right eye. It tensed, stared in amazement and filled with alarm. No mediocre mind

to burden the Republic sat by the microscope. No, this was Professor Persikov! All his mental powers were now concentrated in his right eye. For five minutes or so in petrified silence the higher being observed the lower one, peering hard at the out-of-focus specimen. There was complete silence all around. Pankrat had gone to sleep in his cubby-hole in the vestibule, and only once there came a far-off gentle and musical tinkling of glass in cupboards—that was Ivanov going out and locking his laboratory. The entrance door groaned behind him. Then came the Professor's voice. To whom his question was addressed no one knows.

"What on earth is that? I don't understand..."

A late lorry rumbled down Herzen Street, making the old walls of the Institute shake. The shallow glass bowl with pipettes tinkled on the table. The Professor turned pale and put his hands over the microscope, like a mother whose child is threatened by danger. There could now be no question of Persikov turning the knob. Oh no, now he was afraid that some external force might push what he had seen out of his field of vision.

It was a full white morning with a strip of gold which cut across the Institute's cream porch when the Professor left the microscope and walked over to the window on stiff legs. With trembling fingers he pressed a button, dense black shutters blotted out the morning and a wise scholarly night descended on the room. Sallow and inspired, Persikov placed his feet apart, staring at the parquet floor with his watering eyes, and exclaimed:

"But how can it be? It's monstrous! Quite monstrous, gentlemen," he repeated, addressing the toads in the terrarium, who were asleep and made no reply.

He paused, then went over to the button, raised the shutters, turned out all the lights and looked into the microscope. His face grew tense and he raised his bushy yellow eyebrows.

"Aha, aha," he muttered. "It's gone. I see. I understand," he drawled, staring with crazed and inspired eyes at the extinguished light overhead. "It's simple."

Again he let down the hissing shutters and put on the light. Then looked into the microscope and grinned happily, almost greedily.

"I'll catch it," he said solemnly and gravely, crooking his finger. "I'll catch it. Perhaps the sun will do it too."

The shutters shot up once more. Now you could see the sun. It was shining on the walls of the Institute and slanting down onto the pavements of Herzen Street. The Professor looked through the window, working out where the sun would be in the afternoon. He kept stepping back and forwards, doing a little dance, and eventually lay stomach down on the window-sill.

After that he got down to some important and mysterious work. He covered the microscope with a bell glass. Then he melted a piece of sealing-wax in the bluish flame of the Bunsen burner, sealed the edge of the glass to the table and made a thumb print on the blobs of wax. Finally he turned off the gas and went out, locking the laboratory door firmly behind him.

There was semi-darkness in the Institute corridors. The Professor reached Pankrat's door and knocked for a long time to no effect. At last something inside growled like a watchdog, coughed and snorted and Pankrat appeared in the lighted doorway wearing long striped underpants tied at the ankles. His eyes glared wildly at the scientist and he whimpered softly with sleep.

"I must apologise for waking you up, Pankrat," said the Professor, peering at him over his spectacles. "But please don't go into my laboratory this morning, dear chap. I've left some work there that must on no account be moved. Understand?"

"Grrr, yessir," Pankrat replied, not understanding a thing. He staggered a bit and growled.

"Now listen here, Pankrat, you just wake up," the zoologist ordered, prodding him lightly in the ribs, which produced a look of fright on Pankrat's face and a glimmer of comprehension in his eyes. "I've locked the laboratory," Persikov went on, "so you need not clean it until I come back. Understand?"

"Yessir," Pankrat croaked.

"That's fine then, go back to bed."

Pankrat turned round, disappeared inside and collapsed onto the bed. The Professor went into the vestibule. Putting on his grey summer coat and soft hat, he remembered what he had observed in the microscope and stared at his galoshes for

a few seconds, as if seeing them for the first time. Then he put on the left galosh and tried to put the right one over it, but it wouldn't go on.

"What an incredible coincidence that he called me away," said the scientist. "Otherwise I would never have noticed it. But what does it mean? The devil only knows!.."

The Professor smiled, squinted at his galoshes, took off the left one and put on the right. "Good heavens! One can't even imagine all the consequences..." The Professor prodded off the left galosh, which had irritated him by not going on top of the right, and walked to the front door wearing one galosh only. He also lost his handkerchief and went out, slamming the heavy door. On the porch he searched in his pockets for some matches, patting his sides, found them eventually and set off down the street with an unlit cigarette in his mouth.

The scientist did not meet a soul all the way to the church. There he threw back his head and stared at the golden dome. The sun was licking it avidly on one side.

"Why didn't I notice it before? What a coincidence! Well, I never! Silly ass!" The Professor looked down and stared pensively at his strangely shod feet. "Hm, what shall I do? Go back to Pankrat? No, there's no waking him. It's a pity to throw the wretched thing away. I'll have to carry it." He removed the galosh and set off carrying it distastefully.

An old car drove out of Prechistenka with three passengers. Two men, slightly tipsy, with a garishly made-up woman in those baggy silk trousers that were all the rage in 1928 sitting on their lap.

"Hey, Dad!" she shouted in a low husky voice. "Did you sell the other galosh for booze?"

"The old boy got sozzled at the Alcazar," howled the man on the left, while the one on the right leaned out of the car and shouted:

"Is the night-club in Volkhonka still open, Dad? That's where we're making for!"

The Professor looked at them sternly over the top of his glasses, let the cigarette fall out of his mouth and then immediately forgot they existed. A beam was cutting its way through Prechistensky Boulevard, and the dome of Christ the Saviour had begun to burn. The sun had come out.

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Persikov Catches It

What had happened was this. When the Professor put his discerning eye to the microscope, he noticed for the first time in his life that one particular ray in the coloured tendril stood out more vividly and boldly than the others. This ray was bright red and stuck out of the tendril like the tiny point of a needle, say.

Thus, as ill luck would have it, this ray attracted the attention of the great man's experienced eye for several seconds.

In it, the ray, the Professor detected something a thousand times more significant and important than the ray itself, that precarious offspring accidentally engendered by the movement of a microscope mirror and lens. Due to the assistant calling the Professor away, some amoebas had been subject to the action of the ray for an hour-and-a-half and this is what had happened: whereas the blobs of amoebas on the plate outside the ray simply lay there limp and helpless, some very strange phenomena were taking place on the spot over which the sharp red sword was poised. This strip of red was teeming with life. The old amoebas were forming pseudopodia in a desperate effort to reach the red strip, and when they did they came to life, as if by magic. Some force seemed to breathe life into them. They flocked there, fighting one another for a place in the ray, where the most frantic (there was no other word for it) reproduction was taking place. In defiance of all the laws which Persikov knew like the back of his hand, they gemmated before his eyes with lightning speed. They split into two in the ray, and each of the parts became a new, fresh organism in a couple of seconds. In another second or two these organisms grew to maturity and produced a new generation in their turn. There was soon no room at all in the red strip or on the plate, and inevitably a bitter struggle broke out. The newly born amoebas tore one another to pieces and gobbled the pieces up. Among the newly born lay the corpses of those who had perished in the fight for survival. It was the best and strongest who won. And they were terrifying. Firstly, they were about twice the size of ordinary amoebas and, sec-

ondly, they were far more active and aggressive. Their movements were rapid, their pseudopodia much longer than normal, and it would be no exaggeration to say that they used them like an octopus's tentacles.

On the second evening the Professor, pale and haggard, his only sustenance the thick cigarettes he rolled himself, studied the new generation of amoebas. And on the third day he turned to the primary source, i.e., the red ray.

The gas hissed faintly in the Bunsen burner, the traffic clattered along the street outside, and the Professor, poisoned by a hundred cigarettes, eyes half-closed, leaned back in his revolving chair.

"I see it all now. The ray brought them to life. It's a new ray, never studied or even discovered by anyone before. The first thing is to find out whether it is produced only by electricity, or by the sun as well," Persikov muttered to himself.

The next night provided the answer to this question. Persikov caught three rays in three microscopes from the arc light, but nothing from the sun, and summed this up as follows:

"We must assume that it is not found in the solar spectrum... Hm, well, in short we must assume it can only be obtained from electric light." He gazed fondly at the frosted ball overhead, thought for a moment and invited Ivanov into the laboratory, where he told him all and showed him the amoebas.

Docent Ivanov was amazed, quite flabbergasted. Why on earth hadn't a simple thing as this tiny arrow been noticed before? By anyone, or even by him, Ivanov. It was really appalling! Just look...

"Look, Vladimir Ipatych!" Ivanov said, his eye glued to the microscope. "Look what's happening! They're growing before my eyes... You must take a look..."

"I've been observing them for three days," Persikov replied animatedly.

Then a conversation took place between the two scientists, the gist of which was as follows. Docent Ivanov undertook with the help of lenses and mirrors to make a chamber in which they could obtain the ray in magnified form without a microscope. Ivanov hoped, was even convinced, that this would be extremely simple. He would obtain the ray, Vladimir

Ipatych need have no doubts on that score. There was a slight pause.

"When I publish a paper, I shall mention that the chamber was built by you, Pyotr Stepanovich," Persikov interspersed, feeling that the pause should be ended.

"Oh, that doesn't matter... However, if you insist..."

And the pause ended. After that the ray devoured Ivanov as well. While Persikov, emaciated and hungry, spent all day and half the night at his microscope, Ivanov got busy in the brightly-lit physics laboratory, working out a combination of lenses and mirrors. He was assisted by the mechanic.

Following a request made to the Commissariat of Education, Persikov received three parcels from Germany containing mirrors, convexo-convex, concavo-concave and even some convexo-concave polished lenses. The upshot of all this was that Ivanov not only built his chamber, but actually caught the red ray in it. And quite brilliantly, it must be said. The ray was a thick one, about four centimetres in diameter, sharp and strong.

On June 1st the chamber was set up in Persikov's laboratory, and he began experimenting avidly by putting frog spawn in the ray. These experiments produced amazing results. In the course of forty-eight hours thousands of tadpoles hatched out from the spawn. But that was not all. Within another twenty-four hours the tadpoles grew fantastically into such vicious, greedy frogs that half of them were devoured by the other half. The survivors then began to spawn rapidly and two days later, without the assistance of the ray, a new generation appeared too numerous to count. Then all hell was let loose in the Professor's laboratory. The tadpoles slithered out all over the Institute. Lusty choirs croaked loudly in the terrariums and all the nooks and crannies, as in marshes. Pankrat, who was scared stiff of Persikov as it was, now went in mortal terror of him. After a week the scientist himself felt he was going mad. The Institute reeked of ether and potassium cyanide, which nearly finished off Pankrat when he removed his mask too soon. This expanding marshland generation was eventually exterminated with poison and the laboratories aired.

"You know, Pyotr Stepanovich," Persikov said to Ivanov, "the effect of the ray on deuteroplasm and on the ovule in general is quite extraordinary."

Ivanov, a cold and reserved gentleman, interrupted the Professor in an unusual voice:

"Why talk of such minor details as deuteroplasm, Vladimir Ipatych? Let's not beat about the bush. You have discovered something unheard-of..." With a great effort Ivanov managed to force the words out. "You have discovered the ray of life, Professor Persikov!"

A faint flush appeared on Persikov's pale, unshaven cheekbones.

"Well, well," he mumbled.

"You," Ivanov went on, "you will win such renown... It makes my head go round. Do you understand, Vladimir Ipatych," he continued excitedly, "H. G. Wells's heroes are nothing compared to you... And I thought that was all make-believe... Remember his *Food for the Gods*?"

"Ah, that's a novel," Persikov replied.

"Yes, of course, but it's famous!"

"I've forgotten it," Persikov said. "I remember reading it, but I've forgotten it."

"How can you have? Just look at that!" Ivanov picked up an incredibly large frog with a swollen belly from the glass table by its leg. Even after death its face had a vicious expression. "It's monstrous!"

CHAPTER IV

Drozdova, the Priest's Widow

Goodness only knows why, perhaps Ivanov was to blame or perhaps the sensational news just travelled through the air on its own, but in the huge seething city of Moscow people suddenly started talking about the ray and Professor Persikov. True, only in passing and vaguely. The news about the miraculous discovery hopped like a wounded bird round the shining capital, disappearing from time to time, then popping up again, until the middle of July when a short item about the ray appeared in the Science and Technology News section on page 20 of the newspaper *Izvestia*. It announced briefly that a well-known professor at the Fourth University had invented a ray capable of increasing the activity of lower organisms to an

incredible degree, and that the phenomenon would have to be checked. There was a mistake in the name, of course, which was given as "Pepsikov".

Ivanov brought the newspaper and showed Persikov the article.

"Pepsikov," muttered Persikov, as he busied himself with the chamber in his laboratory. "How do those newsmongers find out everything?"

Alas, the misprinted surname did not save the Professor from the events that followed, and they began the very next day, immediately turning Persikov's whole life upside down.

After a discreet knock, Pankrat appeared in the laboratory and handed Persikov a magnificent glossy visiting card.

"'E's out there," Pankrat added timidly.

The elegantly printed card said:

Alfred Arkadyevich
Bronsky

Correspondent for the Moscow magazines *Red Light, Red Pepper, Red Journal* and *Red Searchlight* and the newspaper *Red Moscow Evening News*

"Tell him to go to blazes," said Persikov flatly, tossing the card under the table.

Pankrat turned round and went out, only to return five minutes later with a pained expression on his face and a second specimen of the same visiting card.

"Is this supposed to be a joke?" squeaked Persikov, his voice shrill with rage.

"Sez 'e's from the Gee-Pee-Yoo," Pankrat replied, white as a sheet.

Persikov snatched the card with one hand, almost tearing it in half, and threw his pincers onto the table with the other. The card bore a message in ornate handwriting: "Humbly request three minutes of your precious time, esteemed Professor, on public press business, correspondent of the satirical magazine *Red Mâria*, a GPU publication."

"Send him in," said Persikov with a sigh.

A young man with a smoothly shaven oily face immediately popped out from behind Pankrat's back. He had permanently raised eyebrows, like a Chinaman, over agate eyes which never looked at the person he was talking to. The young man

was dressed impeccably in the latest fashion. He wore a long narrow jacket down to his knees, extremely baggy trousers and unnaturally wide glossy shoes with toes like hooves. In his hands he held a cane, a hat with a pointed top and a note-pad.

"What do you want?" asked Persikov in a voice which sent Pankrat scuttling out of the room. "Weren't you told that I am busy?"

In lieu of a reply the young man bowed twice to the Professor, to the left and to the right of him, then his eyes skimmed over the whole laboratory, and the young man jotted a mark in his pad.

"I am busy," repeated the Professor, looking with loathing into the visitor's eyes, but to no avail for they were too elusive.

"A thousand apologies, esteemed Professor," the young man said in a thin voice, "for intruding upon you and taking up your precious time, but the news of your incredible discovery which has astounded the whole world compels our journal to ask you for some explanations."

"What explanations, what whole world?" Persikov whined miserably, turning yellow. "I don't have to give you any explanations or anything of the sort... I'm busy... Terribly busy."

"What are you working on?" the young man asked ingratiatingly, putting a second mark in his pad.

"Well, I'm... Why? Do you want to publish something?"

"Yes," replied the young man and suddenly started scribbling furiously.

"Firstly, I do not intend to publish anything until I have finished my work ... and certainly not in your newspapers... Secondly, how did you find out about this?" Persikov suddenly felt at a loss.

"Is it true that you have invented a new life ray?"

"What new life?" exploded the Professor. "You're talking absolute piffle! The ray I am working on has not been fully studied, and nothing at all is known yet! It may be able to increase the activity of protoplasm..."

"By how much?" the young man asked quickly.

Persikov was really at a loss now. "The insolent devil! What the blazes is going on?" he thought to himself.

"What ridiculous questions! Suppose I say, well, a thousand times!"

Predatory delight flashed in the young man's eyes.

"Does that produce gigantic organisms?"

"Nothing of the sort! Well, of course, the organisms I have obtained are bigger than usual. And they do have some new properties. But the main thing is not the size, but the incredible speed of reproduction," Persikov heard himself say to his utmost dismay. Having filled up a whole page, the young man turned over and went on scribbling.

"Don't write it down!" Persikov croaked in despair, realising that he was in the young man's hands. "What are you writing?"

"Is it true that in forty-eight hours you can hatch two million tadpoles from frog-spawn?"

"From how much spawn?" exploded Persikov, losing his temper again. "Have you ever seen the spawn of a tree-frog, say?"

"From half-a-pound?" asked the young man, unabashed.

Persikov flushed with anger.

"Whoever measures it like that? Pah! What are you talking about? Of course, if you were to take half-a-pound of frog-spawn, then perhaps... Well, about that much, damn it, but perhaps a lot more!"

Diamonds flashed in the young man's eyes, as he filled up yet another page in one fell swoop.

"Is it true that this will cause a world revolution in animal husbandry?"

"Trust the press to ask a question like that," Persikov howled. "I forbid you to write such rubbish. I can see from your face that you're writing sheer nonsense!"

"And now, if you'd be so kind, Professor, a photograph of you," said the young man, closing his note-pad with a snap.

"What's that? A photograph of me? To put in those magazines of yours? Together with all that diabolical rubbish you've been scribbling down. No, certainly not... And I'm extremely busy. I really must ask you to..."

"Any old one will do. And we'll return it straightaway."

"Pankrat!" the Professor yelled in a fury.

"Your humble servant," said the young man and vanished.

Instead of Pankrat came the strange rhythmic scraping sound of something metallic hitting the floor, and into the laboratory rolled a man of unusual girth, dressed in a blouse and trousers made from a woollen blanket. His left, artificial

leg clattered and clanked, and he was holding a briefcase. The clean-shaven round face resembling yellowish meat-jelly was creased into a welcoming smile. He bowed in military fashion to the Professor and drew himself up, his leg giving a spring-like snap. Persikov was speechless.

"My dear Professor," the stranger began in a pleasant, slightly throaty voice, "forgive an ordinary mortal for invading your seclusion."

"Are you a reporter?" Persikov asked. "Pankrat!"

"Certainly not, dear Professor," the fat man replied. "Allow me to introduce myself—naval captain and contributor to the *Industrial Herald*, newspaper of the Council of People's Commissars."

"Pankrat!" cried Persikov hysterically, and at that very moment a red light went on in the corner and the telephone rang softly. "Pankrat!" the Professor cried again. "Hello."

"*Verzeihen Sie bitte, Herr Professor*," croaked the telephone in German, "*das ich störe. Ich bin Mitarbeiter des Berliner Tageblatts...*"

"Pankrat!" the Professor shouted down the receiver. "*Bin momental sehr beschäftigt und kann Sie deshalb jetzt nicht empfangen*! Pankrat!"

And just at this moment the bell at the main door started ringing.

* * *

"Terrible murder in Bronnaya Street!" yelled unnaturally hoarse voices, darting about between wheels and flashing headlights on the hot June roadway. "Terrible illness of chickens belonging to the priest's widow Drozdova with a picture of her! Terrible discovery of life ray by Professor Persikov!"

Persikov dashed out so quickly that he almost got run over by a car in Mokhovaya and grabbed a newspaper angrily.

"Three copecks, citizen!" cried the newsboy, squeezing into the crowd on the pavement and yelling: "*Red Moscow Evening News*, discovery of X-ray!"

The flabbergasted Persikov opened the newspaper and huddled against a lamp-post. On page two in the left-hand corner a bald man with crazed, unseeing eyes and a hanging lower jaw, the fruit of Alfred Bronsky's artistic endeavours,

stared at him from a smudged frame. The caption beneath it read: "V. I. Persikov who discovered the mysterious ray." Lower down, under the heading *A World-Wide Enigma* was an article which began as follows:

"'Take a seat,' the eminent scientist Persikov invited me hospitably..."

The article was signed with a flourish "Alfred Bronsky (Alonso)".

A greenish light soared up over the University roof, the words "Talking Newspaper" lit up in the sky, and a crowd jammed Mokhovaya.

"'Take a seat!' an unpleasant thin voice, just like Alfred Bronsky's magnified a thousand times, yelped from a loudspeaker on the roof, "the eminent scientist Persikov invited me hospitably. 'I've been wanting to tell the workers of Moscow the results of my discovery for some time...'"

There was a faint metallic scraping behind Persikov's back, and someone tugged at his sleeve. Turning round he saw the yellow rotund face of the owner of the artificial leg. His eyes were glistening with tears and his lips trembled.

"You wouldn't tell me the results of your remarkable discovery, Professor," he said sadly with a deep sigh. "So that's farewell to a few more copecks."

He gazed miserably at the University roof, where the invisible Alfred raved on in the loudspeaker's black jaws. For some reason Persikov felt sorry for the fat man.

"I never asked him to sit down!" he growled, catching words from the sky furiously. "He's an utter scoundrel! You must excuse me, but really when you're working like that and people come bursting in... I'm not referring to you, of course..."

"Then perhaps you'd just describe your chamber to me, Professor?" the man with the artificial leg wheedled mournfully. "It doesn't make any difference now..."

"In three days half-a-pound of frog-spawn produces more tadpoles than you could possibly count," the invisible man in the loudspeaker boomed.

"Toot-toot," cried the cars on Mokhovaya.

"Ooo! Ah! Listen to that!" the crowd murmured, staring upwards.

"What a scoundrel! Eh?" hissed Persikov, shaking with

anger, to the artificial man. "How do you like that? I'll lodge an official complaint against him."

"Disgraceful!" the fat man agreed.

A blinding violet ray dazzled the Professor's eyes, lighting up everything around—a lamp-post, a section of pavement, a yellow wall and the avid faces.

"They're photographing you, Professor," the fat man whispered admiringly and hung on the Professor's arm like a ton weight. Something clicked in the air.

"To blazes with them!" cried Persikov wretchedly, pushing his way with the ton weight out of the crowd. "Hey, taxi! Prechistenka Street!"

A battered old jalopy, a 'twenty-four model, chugged to a stop, and the Professor climbed in, trying to shake off the fat man.

"Let go!" he hissed, shielding his face with his hands to ward off the violet light.

"Have you read it? What they're shouting? Professor Persikov and his children've had their throats cut in Malaya Bronnaya!" people were shouting in the crowd.

"I don't have any children, blast you!" yelled Persikov, suddenly coming into the focus of a black camera which snapped him in profile with his mouth wide open and eyes glaring.

"Chu ... ug, chu ... ug," revved the taxi and barged into the crowd.

The fat man was already sitting in the cab, warming the Professor's side.

CHAPTER V

The Tale of the Chickens

In the small provincial town formerly called Trinity, but now Glassworks, in Kostroma Province (Glassworks District), a woman in a grey dress with a kerchief tied round her head walked onto the porch of a little house in what was formerly Church, but now Personal Street and burst into tears. This woman, the widow of Drozdov, the former priest of the former church, sobbed so loudly that soon another woman's

head in a fluffy scarf popped out of a window in the house across the road and exclaimed:

"What's the matter, Stepanovna? Another one?"

"The seventeenth!" replied the former Drozdova, sobbing even louder.

"Dearie me," tutted the woman in the scarf, shaking her head, "did you ever hear of such a thing? 'Tis the anger of the Lord, and no mistake! Dead, is she?"

"Come and see, Matryona," said the priest's widow, amid loud and bitter sobs. "Take a look at her!"

Banging the rickety grey gate, the woman padded barefoot over the dusty hummocks in the road to be taken by the priest's widow into the chicken run.

It must be said that instead of losing heart, the widow of Father Savvaty Drozdov, who had died in 'twenty-six of anti-religious mortification, set up a nice little poultry business. As soon as things began to go well, the widow received such an exorbitant tax demand that the poultry business would have closed down had it not been for certain good folk. They advised the widow to inform the local authorities that she, the widow, was setting up a poultry cooperative. The cooperative consisted of Drozdova herself, her faithful servant Matryoshka and the widow's dear niece. The tax was reduced, and the poultry-farm prospered so much that in 'twenty-eight the widow had as many as 250 chickens, even including some Cochins. Each Sunday the widow's eggs appeared at Glassworks market. They were sold in Tambov and were even occasionally displayed in the windows of the former Chichkin's Cheese and Butter Shop in Moscow.

And now, the seventeenth brahmaputra that morning, their dear little crested hen, was walking round the yard vomiting. The poor thing gurgled and retched, rolling her eyes sadly at the sun as if she would never see it again. In front of her squatted co-operative-member Matryoshka with a cup of water.

"Come on, Cresty dear ... chuck-chuck-chuck ... drink some water," Matryoshka begged, thrusting the cup under the hen's beak, but the hen would not drink. She opened her beak wide, threw back her head and began to vomit blood.

"Lord Jesus!" cried the guest, slapping her thighs. "Just look at that! Clots of blood. I've never seen a hen bring up like that before, so help me God!"

These words accompanied the poor hen on her last journey. She suddenly keeled over, digging her beak helplessly into the dust, and swivelled her eyes. Then she rolled onto her back with her legs sticking up and lay motionless. Matryoshka wept in her deep bass voice, spilling the water, and the Chairman of the cooperative, the priest's widow, wept too while her guest lent over and whispered in her ear:

"Stepanovna, I'll eat my hat if someone hasn't put the evil eye on your hens. Whoever heard of it! Chickens don't have diseases like this! Someone's put a spell on them."

"'Tis devils' work!" the priest's widow cried to heaven. "They want to see me good and done for!"

Her words called forth a loud cock-a-doodle-doo, and lurching sideways out of the chicken-coop, like a restless drunk out of a tavern, came a tatty scrawny rooster. Rolling his eyes at them ferociously, he staggered about on the spot and spread his wings like an eagle, but instead of flying up, he began to run round the yard in circles, like a horse on a rope. On his third time round he stopped, vomited, then began to cough and choke, spitting blood all over the place and finally fell down with his legs pointing up at the sun like masts. The yard was filled with women's wails, which were answered by an anxious clucking, clattering and fidgeting from the chicken-coop.

"What did I tell you? The evil eye," said the guest triumphantly. "You must get Father Sergius to sprinkle holy water."

At six o'clock in the evening, when the sun's fiery visage was sitting low among the faces of young sunflowers, Father Sergius, the senior priest at the church, finished the rite and took off his stole. Inquisitive heads peeped over the wooden fence and through the cracks. The mournful priest's widow kissed the crucifix and handed a torn yellow rouble note damp from her tears to Father Sergius, in response to which the latter sighed and muttered something about the good Lord visiting his wrath upon us. Father Sergius's expression suggested that he knew perfectly well why the good Lord was doing so, only he would not say.

Whereupon the crowd in the street dispersed, and since chickens go to sleep early no one knew that in the chicken-coop of Drozdova's neighbour three hens and a rooster had kicked the bucket all at once. They vomited like Drozdova's

hens, only their end came inconspicuously in the locked chicken-coop. The rooster toppled off the perch head-first and died in that pose. As for the widow's hens, they gave up the ghost immediately after the service, and by evening there was a deathly hush in her chicken-coop and piles of dead poultry.

The next morning the town got up and was thunderstruck to hear that the story had assumed strange, monstrous proportions. By midday there were only three chickens still alive in Personal Street, in the last house where the provincial tax inspector rented lodgings, but they, too, popped off by one p. m. And come evening, the small town of Glassworks was buzzing like a bee-hive with the terrible word "plague" passing from mouth to mouth. Drozdova's name got into *The Red Warrior*, the local newspaper, in an article entitled "Does This Mean a Chicken Plague?" and from there raced on to Moscow.

* * *

Professor Persikov's life took on a strange, uneasy and worrisome complexion. In short, it was quite impossible for him to work in this situation. The day after he got rid of Alfred Bronsky, he was forced to disconnect the telephone in his laboratory at the Institute by taking the receiver off, and in the evening as he was riding along Okhotny Row in a tram, the Professor saw himself on the roof of an enormous building with *Workers' Paper* in black letters. He, the Professor, was climbing into a taxi, fuming, green around the gills, and blinking, followed by a rotund figure in a blanket, who was clutching his sleeve. The Professor on the roof, on the white screen, put his hands over his face to ward off the violet ray. Then followed in letters of fire: "Professor Persikov in a car explaining everything to our well-known reporter Captain Stepanov." And there was the rickety old jalopy dashing along Volkhonka, past the Church of Christ the Saviour, with the Professor bumping up and down inside it, looking like a wolf at bay.

"They're devils, not human beings," the zoologist hissed through clenched teeth as he rode past.

That evening, returning to his apartment in Prechistenka, the zoologist received from the housekeeper, Maria Stepanovna, seventeen slips of paper with the telephone numbers of people who had rung during his absence, plus Maria Stepanovna's oral statement that she was worn out. The Professor was about to tear the pieces of paper up, but stopped when he saw "People's Commissariat of Health" scribbled next to one of the numbers.

"What's up?" the eccentric scientist was genuinely puzzled. "What's the matter with them?"

At ten fifteen on the same evening the bell rang, and the Professor was obliged to converse with a certain exquisitely attired citizen. The Professor received him thanks to a visiting card which said (without mentioning any names) "Authorised Head of Trading Sections for Foreign Firms Represented in the Republic of Soviets."

"The devil take him," Persikov growled, putting his magnifying glass and some diagrams down on the baize cloth.

"Send him in here, that authorised whatever he is," he said to Maria Stepanovna.

"What can I do for you?" Persikov asked in a tone that made the authorised whatever he was shudder perceptibly. Persikov shifted his spectacles from his nose to his forehead and back again, and looked his visitor up and down. The latter glistened with hair cream and precious stones, and a monocle sat in his right eye. "What a foul-looking face," Persikov thought to himself for some reason.

The guest began in circuitous fashion by asking permission to smoke a cigar, as a result of which Persikov reluctantly invited him to take a seat. Then the guest began apologising at length for having come so late. "But it's impossible to catch ... oh, tee-hee, pardon me ... to find the Professor at home in the daytime." (The guest gave a sobbing laugh like a hyena.)

"Yes, I'm very busy!" Persikov answered so curtly that the visitor shuddered visibly again.

Nevertheless he had taken the liberty of disturbing the famous scientist. Time is money, as they say ... the Professor didn't object to his cigar, did he?

"Hrmph, hrmph, hrmph," Persikov replied. He'd given him permission...

"You have discovered the ray of life, haven't you, Professor?"

"Balderdash! What life? The newspapers invented that!"

"Oh, no, tee-hee-hee..." He perfectly understood the modesty that is an invariable attribute of all true scholars ... of course... There had been telegrams today... In the cities of Warsaw and Riga they had already heard about the ray. Professor Persikov's name was on everyone's lips... The whole world was following his work with bated breath... But everyone knew how hard it was for scholars in Soviet Russia. *Entre nous, soi-dis*... There wasn't anyone else listening, was there? Alas, they didn't appreciate academic work here, so he would like to have a little talk with the Professor... A certain foreign state was offering Professor Persikov entirely disinterested assistance with his laboratory research. Why cast your pearls here, as the Scriptures say? This state knew how hard it had been for the Professor in 'nineteen and 'twenty during that tee-hee ... revolution. Of course, it would all be kept absolutely secret. The Professor would inform the state of the results of his work, and it would finance him in return. Take that chamber he had built, for instance. It would be interesting to have a peep at the designs for it...

At this point the guest took a pristine wad of banknotes out of his inside jacket pocket...

A mere trifle, a deposit of 5,000 roubles, say, could be given to the Professor this very moment ... no receipt was required. The authorised whatever he was would be most offended if the Professor even mentioned a receipt.

"Get out!" Persikov suddenly roared so terrifyingly that the high keys on the piano in the drawing-room vibrated.

The guest vanished so quickly that after a moment Persikov, who was shaking with rage, was not sure whether he had been a hallucination or not.

"His galoshes?" Persikov yelled a moment later in the hall.

"The gentleman forgot them, sir," replied a quaking Maria Stepanovna.

"Throw them out!"

"How can I? The gentleman's bound to come back for them."

"Hand them over to the house committee. And get a re-

ccipt. Don't let me ever set eyes on them again! Take them to the committee! Let them have that spy's galoshes!"

Maria Stepanovna crossed herself, picked up the splendid leather galoshes and took them out of the back door. She stood outside for a while, then hid the galoshes in the pantry.

"Handed them over?" growled Persikov.

"Yes, sir."

"Give me the receipt."

"But the Chairman can't write, Vladimir Ipatych!"

"Get. Me. A. Receipt. At. Once. Let some literate rascal sign it for him."

Maria Stepanovna just shook her head, went off and returned a quarter of an hour later with a note which said:

"Rcvd for storage from Prof. Persikov I (one) pr. ga's. Kolesov."

"And what might that be?"

"It's a baggage check, sir."

Persikov trampled on the check, but put the receipt under the blotter. Then a sudden thought made his high forehead darken. He rushed to the telephone, rang Pankrat at the Institute and asked him if everything was alright there. Pankrat snarled something into the receiver, which could be interpreted as meaning that, as far as he could see, everything there was fine. But Persikov did not calm down for long. A moment later he grabbed the phone and boomed into the receiver:

"Give me the, what's it called, Lubyanka. Merci... Which of you should I report this to ... there are some suspicious-looking characters in galoshes round here, and ... Professor Persikov of the Fourth University..."

The receiver suddenly cut the conversation short, and Persikov walked away, cursing under his breath.

"Would you like some tea, Vladimir Ipatych?" Maria Stepanovna enquired timidly, peeping into the study.

"No, I would not ... and the devil take the lot of them... What's got into them!"

Exactly ten minutes later the Professor received some new visitors in his study. One of them was pleasant, rotund and very polite, in an ordinary khaki service jacket and breeches. A pince-nez perched on his nose, like a crystal butterfly. In fact he looked like a cherub in patent leather boots. The sec-

ond, short and extremely grim, wore civilian clothes, but they seemed to constrict him. The third visitor behaved in a most peculiar fashion. He did not enter the Professor's study, but stayed outside in the dark corridor. The brightly lit study wreathed in clouds of tobacco smoke was entirely visible to him. The face of this third man, also in civilian clothes, was adorned by a tinted pince-nez.

The two inside the study wore Persikov out completely, examining the visiting card, asking him about the five thousand and making him describe what the man looked like.

"The devil only knows," Persikov muttered. "Well, he had a loathsome face. A degenerate."

"Did he have a glass eye?" the small man croaked.

"The devil only knows. But no, he didn't. His eyes darted about all the time."

"Rubinstein?" the cherub asked the small man quietly. But the small man shook his head gloomily.

"Rubinstein would never give cash without a receipt, that's for sure," he muttered. "This isn't Rubinstein's work. It's someone bigger."

The story about the galoshes evoked the liveliest interest from the visitors. The cherub rapped a few words down the receiver: "The State Political Board orders house committee secretary Kolesov to come to Professor Persikov's apartment at once with the galoshes." In a flash Kolesov turned up in the study, pale-faced and clutching the pair of galoshes.

"Vasenka!" the cherub called quietly to the man sitting in the hall, who got up lethargically and slouched into the study. The tinted lenses had swallowed up his eyes completely.

"Yeh?" he asked briefly and sleepily.

"The galoshes."

The tinted lenses slid over the galoshes, and Persikov thought he saw a pair of very sharp eyes, not at all sleepy, flash out from under the lenses for a second. But they disappeared almost at once.

"Well, Vasenka?"

The man called Vasenka replied in a flat voice:

"Well what? They're Polenzhkovsky's galoshes."

The house committee was immediately deprived of Professor Persikov's present. The galoshes disappeared in a newspaper. Highly delighted, the cherub in the service jacket rose

to his feet and began to pump the Professor's hand, even delivering a small speech, the gist of which was as follows: it did the Professor honour ... the Professor could rest assured ... he would not be disturbed any more, either at the Institute or at home ... steps would be taken, his chambers were perfectly safe...

"But couldn't you shoot the reporters?" asked Persikov, looking over his spectacles.

His question cheered the visitors up no end. Not only the small gloomy one, but even the tinted one in the hall gave a big smile. Beaming and sparkling, the cherub explained that that was impossible.

"But who was that scoundrel who came here?"

The smiles disappeared at once, and the cherub replied evasively that it was just some petty speculator not worth worrying about. All the same he trusted that the Professor would treat the events of this evening in complete confidence, and the visitors left.

Persikov returned to his study and the diagrams, but he was not destined to study them. The telephone's red light went on, and a female voice suggested that the Professor might like to marry an attractive and amorous widow with a seven-roomed apartment. Persikov howled down the receiver:

"I advise you to get treatment from Professor Rossolimo..." and then the phone rang again.

This time Persikov softened somewhat, because the person, quite a famous one, who was ringing from the Kremlin enquired at length with great concern about Persikov's work and expressed the desire to visit his laboratory. Stepping back from the telephone, Persikov wiped his forehead and took off the receiver. Then trumpets began blaring and the shrieks of the Valkyrie rang in the apartment upstairs. The cloth mill director's radio had tuned in to the Wagner concert at the Bolshoi. To the accompaniment of howls and rumbles descending from the ceiling, Persikov declared to Maria Stepanovna that he would take the director to court, smash his radio to bits, and get the blazes out of Moscow, because somebody was clearly trying to drive him out. He broke his magnifying glass, spent the night on the divan in the study and was lulled to sleep by the sweet trills of a famous pianist wafted from the Bolshoi Theatre.

The following day was also full of surprises. After taking the tram to the Institute, Persikov found a stranger in a fashionable green bowler hat standing on the porch. He scrutinised Persikov carefully, but did not address any questions to him, so Persikov put up with him. But in the Institute hall, apart from the dismayed Pankrat, a second bowler hat stood up as Persikov came in and greeted him courteously: "Good morning, Citizen Professor."

"What do you want?" asked Persikov furiously, tearing off his coat with Pankrat's help. But the bowler hat quickly pacified Persikov by whispering in the gentlest of voices that there was no need at all for the Professor to be upset. He, the bowler hat, was there precisely in order to protect the Professor from all sorts of importunate visitors. The Professor could rest assured not only about the laboratory doors, but also about the windows. So saying the stranger turned back the lapel of his jacket for a moment and showed the Professor a badge.

"Hm ... you work pretty efficiently, I must say," Persikov growled, adding naively: "What will you have to eat?"

Whereupon the bowler hat smiled and explained that someone would come to relieve him.

The next three days were splendid. The Professor had two visits from the Kremlin and one from the students whom he was to examine. The students all failed to a man, and you could see from their faces that Persikov now filled them with a superstitious dread.

"Go and be bus conductors! You're not fit to study zoology," came the shouts from his laboratory.

"Strict, is he?" the bowler hat asked Pankrat.

"I should say so," Pankrat replied. "If any of 'em stick it to the end, they come staggerin' out, sweatin' like pigs, and make straight for the boozer."

With all this going on the Professor did not notice the time pass, but on the fourth day he was again brought back to reality, thanks to a thin, shrill voice from the street.

"Vladimir Ipatych!" the voice shouted through the open window from Herzen Street. The voice was in luck. Persikov had driven himself too hard in the last few days. And at that moment he was sitting in an armchair having a rest and a smoke, with a vacant stare in his red-rimmed eyes. He was

exhausted. So it was even with a certain curiosity that he looked out of the window and saw Alfred Bronsky on the pavement. The Professor recognised the titled owner of the visiting card from his pointed hat and note-pad. Bronsky gave a tender and courteous bow to the window.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" asked the Professor. He did not have the strength to be angry and was even curious to know what would happen next. Protected by the window he felt safe from Alfred. The ever-vigilant bowler hat outside immediately turned an ear to Bronsky. The latter's face blossomed into the smarmiest of smiles.

"Just a sec or two, dear Professor," said Bronsky, raising his voice to make himself heard. "I have one question only and it concerns zoology. May I put it to you?"

"You may," Persikov replied in a laconic, ironical tone, thinking to himself: "There's something American about that rascal, you know."

"What have you to say re the fowls, Professor?" shouted Bronsky, cupping his hands round his mouth.

Persikov was taken aback. He sat on the window-sill, then got down, pressed a knob and shouted, pointing at the window: "Let that fellow on the pavement in, Pankrat!"

When Bronsky walked into the room, Persikov extended his bonhomie to the point of barking "Sit down!" to him.

Smiling ecstatically, Bronsky sat down on the revolving stool.

"Kindly explain something to me," Persikov began. "You write for those newspapers of yours, don't you?"

"That is so," Alfred replied respectfully.

"Well, what I can't understand is how you can write if you can't even speak Russian properly. What do you mean by 'a sec or two' and 're the fowls'?"

Bronsky gave a thin, respectful laugh.

"Valentin Petrovich corrects it."

"And who might Valentin Petrovich be?"

"The head of the literary section."

"Oh, well. I'm not a philologist anyway. Now, leaving aside that Petrovich of yours, what exactly do you wish to know about fowls?"

"Everything you can tell me, Professor."

At this point Bronsky armed himself with a pencil. Sparks of triumph flashed in Persikov's eyes.

"You shouldn't have come to me, I don't specialise in our feathered friends. You should have gone to Yemelian Ivanovich Portugalov, at the First University. I personally know very little..."

Bronsky smiled ecstatically to indicate that he had got the Professor's joke. "Joke—very little!" he scribbled in his pad.

"But if it interests you, of course. Hens, or cristates are a variety of bird from the fowl species. From the pheasant family," Persikov began in a loud voice, looking not at Bronsky, but into the far distance where he could see an audience of thousands. "From the pheasant family ... *phasianus*. They are birds with a fleshy skin crown and two gills under the lower jaw... Hm, although some have only one in the middle under the beak. Now, what else. Their wings are short and rounded. The tail is of medium length, somewhat stepped and even, I would say, roof-shaped. The middle feathers are bent in the form of a sickle... Pankrat ... bring me model No. 705 from the model room, the cross-section of the domestic cock. You don't need it? Don't bring the model, Pankrat. I repeat, I am not a specialist. Go to Portugalov. Now let me see, I personally know of six types of wild fowl... Hm, Portugalov knows more... In India and on the Malaysian archipelago. For example, the Bankiva fowl, or *Gallus bankiva*. It is found in the foothills of the Himalayas, throughout India, in Assam and Burma... The Java fowl, or *Gallus varius* on Lombok, Sumbawa and Flores. And on the island of Java there is the splendid *Gallus eneus* fowl. In south-east India I can recommend the very beautiful *Sonneratii*. I'll show you a drawing of it later. As for Ceylon, here we have the Stanley fowl, which is not found anywhere else."

Bronsky sat there, eyes popping, and scribbled madly.

"Anything else I can tell you?"

"I'd like to hear something about fowl diseases," Alfred whispered quietly.

"Hm, it's not my subject. You should ask Portugalov. But anyway... Well, there are tape-worms, leeches, the itchmite, bird-mite, chicken louse, *Eomenacanthus stramineus*, fleas, chicken cholera, inflammation of the mucous membrane, Pneumonomicosis, tuberculosis, chicken mange ... all sorts of things (Persikov's eyes flashed.) ... poisoning, tumours, rickets, jaundice, rheumatism, Ahorion Schönlein's fungus—

that's a most interesting disease. Small spots like mould appear on the crown..."

Bronsky wiped the sweat off his brow with a coloured handkerchief.

"And what in your opinion, Professor, is the cause of the present catastrophe?"

"What catastrophe?"

"Haven't you read about it, Professor?" exclaimed Bronsky in surprise, pulling a crumpled page of *Izvestia* out of his briefcase.

"I don't read newspapers," Persikov pouted.

"But why not, Professor?" Alfred asked gently.

"Because they write such rubbish," Persikov replied, without thinking.

"But surely not, Professor?" Bronsky whispered softly, unfolding the page.

"What's the matter?" asked Persikov, even rising to his feet. Bronsky's eyes were flashing now. He pointed a sharp painted finger at an incredibly large headline which ran right across the whole page: "Chicken plague in the Republic".

"What?" asked Persikov, pushing his spectacles onto his forehead...

CHAPTER VI

Moscow in June 1928

The city shone, the lights danced, going out and blazing on. In Theatre Square the white lamps of buses mingled with the green lights of trams; above the former Muir and Merilees, its tenth floor added later, skipped a multi-coloured electrical woman, tossing out letter by letter the multicoloured words: "Workers' Credit". A crowd thronged and murmured in the small garden opposite the Bolshoi Theatre, where a multicoloured fountain played at night. And over the Bolshoi itself a huge loudspeaker kept making announcements.

"Anti-fowl vaccinations at Lefortovo Veterinary Institute have produced brilliant results. The number of ... fowl deaths for today has dropped by half..."

Then the loudspeaker changed its tone, something growled

inside it, a spray of green blazed up over the theatre, then went out and the loudspeaker complained in a deep bass:

"An extraordinary commission has been set up to fight the fowl plague consisting of the People's Commissar of Health, the People's Commissar of Agriculture, the head of animal husbandry, Comrade Ptakha-Porosyuk, Professors Persikov and Portugalov ... and Comrade Rabinovich! New attempts at intervention," the loudspeaker giggled and cried, like a jackal, "in connection with the fowl plague!"

Theatre Passage, Neglinnaya and Lubyanka blazed with white and violet neon strips and flickering lights amid wailing sirens and clouds of dust. People crowded round the large notices on the walls, lit by glaring red reflectors.

"All consumption of chickens and chicken eggs is strictly forbidden on pain of severe punishment. Any attempt by private traders to sell them in markets is punishable by law with confiscation of all property. All citizens in possession of eggs are urgently requested to take them to local police stations."

A screen on the roof of the *Workers' Paper* showed chickens piled up to the sky as greenish firemen, fragmenting and sparkling, hosed them with kerosene. Red waves washed over the screen, deathly smoke belched forth, swirling in clouds, and drifted up in a column, then out hopped the fiery letters: "Dead chickens being burnt in Khodynka."

Amid the madly blazing windows of shops open until three in the morning, with breaks for lunch and supper, boarded-up windows with signs saying "Eggs for sale. Quality guaranteed" stared out blindly. Hissing ambulances with "Moscow Health Dept." on them raced past policemen and overtook heavy buses, their sirens wailing.

"Someone else poisoned himself with rotten eggs," the crowd murmured.

The world-famous Empire Restaurant in Petrovsky Lines glowed with green and orange lamps, and inside it by the portable telephones on the tables lay liqueur-stained cardboard notices saying "No omelettes until further notice. Try our fresh oysters."

In the Hermitage Gardens, where Chinese lanterns shone like sad beads in dead choked foliage, on a blindingly lit stage the singers Shrams and Karmanchikov sang satirical songs composed by the poets Ardo and Arguyev,

Oh, Mama, what shall I do
Without my little eggies two?

accompanied by a tap-dance.

The theatre named after the deceased Vsevolod Meyerhold who, it will be remembered, met his end in 1927 during a production of Pushkin's *Boris Godunov*, when the trapezes with naked boyars collapsed, sported a running coloured neon strip announcing a new play by the writer Erendors, entitled "Fowl Farewell" directed by Kuchterman, a pupil of Meyerhold. Next door, at the Aquarium Gardens, ablaze with neon advertisements and shining half-naked women, the revue "Son-of-a-Hen" by the writer Lenivtsev was playing to loud applause among the foliage of the open-air variety stage. And along Tverskaya trotted a line of circus donkeys, with lanterns under each ear and gaudy posters. The Korsh Theatre was reviving Rostand's *Chantecler*.

Newspaper boys bellowed and yelled among the motor wheels:

"Horrific find in underground cave! Poland preparing for horrific war! Horrific experiments by Professor Persikov!"

In the circus of the former Nikitin, in a rich brown arena smelling sweetly of dung, the deathly white clown Bom was talking to Bim, all swollen up with dropsy.

"I know why you're so fed up!"

"Why ith it?" squealed Bim.

"You buried your eggs under a gooseberry bush, and the 15th District police squad has found them."

"Ha-ha-ha-ha," laughed the circus, so hard that the blood curdled happily and longingly in their veins and the trapezes and cobwebs stirred under the old dome.

"Allez-oop!" the clowns shouted loudly, and a well-fed white horse trotted out bearing a stunningly beautiful woman with shapely legs in a crimson costume.

* * *

Not looking at or taking heed of anyone and ignoring the prostitutes' nudges and soft, enticing invitations, the inspired and solitary Professor Persikov crowned with unexpected

fame made his way along Mokhovaya to the neon clock by the Manege. Here, engrossed in his thoughts and not looking where he was going, he collided with a strange, old-fashioned man and banged his fingers painfully against the wooden holster hanging from the man's belt.

"What the devil!" squealed Persikov. "My apologies!"

"Pardon me!" replied an unpleasant voice in return, and they managed to disentangle themselves in the mass of people. The Professor continued on his way to Prechistenka, putting the incident out of his head straightaway.

CHAPTER VII

Feight

Whether or not the Lefortovo veterinary vaccinations were effective, the Samara quarantine teams efficient, the strict measures taken with regard to buyers-up of eggs in Kaluga and Voronezh adequate and the work of the Special Moscow Commission successful, is not known, but what is known is that a fortnight after Persikov's last meeting with Alfred there was not a single chicken left in the Republic. Here and there in provincial back-yards lay plaintive tufts of feathers, bringing tears to the eyes of the owners, and in hospital the last gluttons recovered from diarrhea and vomiting blood. The loss in human life for the whole country was not more than a thousand, fortunately. There were also no large-scale disturbances. True, in Volokolamsk someone calling himself a prophet announced that the commissars, no less, were to blame for the chicken plague, but no one took much notice of him. A few policemen who were confiscating chickens from peasant women at Volokolamsk market got beaten up, and some windows in the local post and telegraph office were smashed. Fortunately, the efficient Volokolamsk authorities took measures as a result of which, firstly, the prophet ceased his activities and, secondly, the telegraph windows were replaced.

After travelling north as far as Archangel and Syumkin Vyselok, the plague stopped of its own accord for the simple reason that it could go no further—there are no chickens in

the White Sea, as we all know. It also stopped in Vladivostok, because after that came the ocean. In the far south it died down and disappeared somewhere in the scorched expanses of Ordubat, Djilfa and Karabulak, and in the west it stopped miraculously right at the Polish and Rumanian frontiers. Perhaps the climate there was different or the quarantine cordon measures taken by these neighbouring states helped. But the fact remains that the plague went no further. The foreign press discussed the unprecedented plague loudly and avidly, and the Soviet government, without kicking up a racket, worked tirelessly round the clock. The Extraordinary Commission to combat the chicken plague was renamed the Extraordinary Commission to encourage and revive poultry-keeping in the Republic and supplemented by a new extraordinary *troika* consisting of sixteen comrades. "Volunteer-Fowl" was founded, of which Persikov and Portugalov became honorary deputy chairmen. The newspapers carried pictures of them with the captions "Mass purchase of eggs from abroad" and "Mr Hughes tries to sabotage egg campaign". A venomous article by the journalist Kolechkin, ending with the words: "Keep your hands off our eggs, Mr Hughes—you've got eggs of your own!", resounded all over Moscow.

Professor Persikov had worked himself to a state of complete exhaustion over the last three weeks. The fowl events had disturbed his usual routine and placed an extra burden on him. He had to spend whole evenings attending fowl committee meetings and from time to time endure long talks either with Alfred Bronsky or the fat man with the artificial leg. And together with Professor Portugalov and docents Ivanov and Borngart he anatomised and microscopised fowls in search of the plague bacillus and even wrote a brochure in the space of only three evenings, entitled "On Changes in the Liver of Fowls Attacked by Plague".

Persikov worked without great enthusiasm in the fowl field, and understandably so since his head was full of something quite different, the main and most important thing, from which the fowl catastrophe had diverted him, i.e., the red ray. Undermining his already overtaxed health by stealing time from sleeping and eating, sometimes not returning to Prechistenka but dozing on the oilskin divan in his room at the

Institute, Persikov spent night after night working with the chamber and the microscope.

By the end of July the commotion had abated somewhat. The renamed commission began to work along normal lines, and Persikov resumed his interrupted studies. The microscopes were loaded with new specimens, and fish- and frog-spawn matured in the chamber at incredible speed. Specially ordered lenses were delivered from Königsberg by aeroplane, and in the last few days of July, under Ivanov's supervision, mechanics installed two big new chambers, in which the beam was as broad as a cigarette packet at its base and a whole metre wide at the other end. Persikov rubbed his hands happily and began to prepare some mysterious and complex experiments. First of all, he came to some agreement with the People's Commissar of Education by phone, and the receiver promised him the most willing assistance of all kinds, then Persikov had a word with Comrade Ptakha-Porosyuk, head of the Supreme Commission's Animal Husbandry Department. Persikov met with the most cordial attention form Ptakha-Porosyuk with respect to a large order from abroad for Professor Persikov. Ptakha-Porosyuk said on the phone that he would cable Berlin and New York rightaway. After that there was a call from the Kremlin to enquire how Persikov was getting on, and an important-sounding voice asked affectionately if he would like a motor-car.

"No, thank you. I prefer to travel by tram," Persikov replied.

"But why?" the mysterious voice asked, with an indulgent laugh.

Actually everyone spoke to Persikov either with respect and awe, or with an affectionate laugh, as if addressing a silly, although very important child.

"It goes faster," Persikov said, after which the resonant bass on the telephone said:

"Well, as you like."

Another week passed, during which Persikov withdrew increasingly from the subsiding fowl problems to immerse himself entirely in the study of the ray. His head became light, somehow transparent and weightless, from the sleepless nights and exhaustion. The red rims never left his eyes now, and almost every night was spent at the Institute. Once he

abandoned his zoological refuge to read a paper on his ray and its action on the ovule in the huge hall of the Central Commission for Improving the Living Conditions of Scientists in Prechistenka. This was a great triumph for the eccentric zoologist. The applause in the hall made the plaster flake off the ceiling, while the hissing arc lamps lit up the black dinner jackets of club-members and the white dresses of their ladies. On the stage, next to the rostrum, a clammy grey frog the size of a cat sat breathing heavily in a dish on a glass table. Notes were thrown onto the stage. They included seven love letters, which Persikov tore up. The club president had great difficulty persuading him onto the platform. Persikov bowed angrily. His hands were wet with sweat and his black tie was somewhere behind his left ear, instead of under his chin. Before him in a breathing haze were hundreds of yellow faces and white male chests, when suddenly the yellow holster of a pistol flashed past and vanished behind a white column. Persikov noticed it vaguely and then forgot about it. But after the lecture, as he was walking down the red carpet of the staircase, he suddenly felt unwell. For a second the bright chandelier in the vestibule clouded and Persikov came over dizzy and slightly queasy. He seemed to smell burning and feel hot, sticky blood running down his neck... With a trembling hand the Professor clutched the banisters.

"Is anything the matter, Vladimir Ipatych?" he was besieged by anxious voices on all sides.

"No, no," Persikov replied, pulling himself together. "I'm just rather tired. Yes. Kindly bring me a glass of water."

* * *

It was a very sunny August day. This disturbed the Professor, so the blinds were pulled down. One flexible standing reflector cast a pencil of sharp light onto the glass table piled with instruments and lenses. The exhausted Persikov was leaning against the back of his revolving chair, smoking and staring through clouds of smoke with dead-tired but contented eyes at the slightly open door of the chamber inside which a red sheaf of light lay quietly, warming the already stuffy and fetid air in the room.

There was a knock at the door.

"What is it?" Persikov asked.

The door creaked lightly, and in came Pankrat. He stood to attention, pallid with fear before the divinity, and announced:

"Feight's come for you, Professor."

The ghost of a smile flickered on the scientist's face. He narrowed his eyes and said:

"That's interesting. Only I'm busy."

"'E says 'e's got an official warrant from the Kremlin."

"Fate with a warrant? That's a rare combination," Persikov remarked. "Oh, well, send him in then!"

"Yessir," Pankrat replied, slithering through the door like a grass-snake.

A minute later it opened again, and a man appeared on the threshold. Persikov creaked his chair and stared at the newcomer over the top of his spectacles and over his shoulder. Persikov was very isolated from real life. He was not interested in it. But even Persikov could not fail to notice the main thing about the man who had just come in. He was dreadfully old-fashioned. In 1919 this man would have looked perfectly at home in the streets of the capital. He would have looked tolerable in 1924, at the beginning. But in 1928 he looked positively strange. At a time when even the most backward part of the proletariat, bakers, were wearing jackets and when military tunics were a rarity, having been finally discarded at the end of 1924, the newcomer was dressed in a double-breasted leather jacket, green trousers, foot bindings and army boots, with a big old-fashioned Mauser in the cracked yellow holster at his side. The newcomer's face made the same impression on Persikov as on everyone else, a highly unpleasant one. The small eyes looked out on the world with a surprised, yet confident expression, and there was something unduly familiar about the short legs with their flat feet. The face was bluish-shaven. Persikov frowned at once. Creaking the screw mercilessly, he peered at the newcomer over his spectacles, then through them, and barked:

"So you've got a warrant, have you? Where is it then?"

The newcomer was clearly taken aback by what he saw. In general he was not prone to confusion, but now he was confused. Judging by his eyes, the thing that impressed him most was the bookcase with twelve shelves stretching right up to

the ceiling and packed full of books. Then, of course, the chambers which, hell-like, were flooded with the crimson ray swelling up in the lenses. And Persikov himself in the semi-darkness by sharp point of the ray falling from the reflector looked strange and majestic in his revolving chair. The newcomer stared at him with an expression in which sparks of respect flashed clearly through the self-assurance, did not hand over any warrant, but said:

"I am Alexander Semyonovich Feight!"

"Well then? So what?"

"I have been put in charge of the Red Ray Model State Farm," the newcomer explained.

"So what?"

"And so I have come to see you on secret business, comrade."

"Well, I wonder what that can be. Put it briefly, if you don't mind."

The newcomer unbuttoned his jacket and pulled out some instructions typed on splendid thick paper. He handed the paper to Persikov, then sat down uninvited on a revolving stool.

"Don't push the table," said Persikov with hatred.

The newcomer looked round in alarm at the table, on the far edge of which a pair of eyes glittered lifelessly like diamonds in a damp dark opening. They sent shivers down your spine.

No sooner had Persikov read the warrant, than he jumped up and rushed to the telephone. A few seconds later he was already saying hastily in a state of extreme irritation:

"Forgive me... I just don't understand... How can it be? Without my consent or advice... The devil only knows what he'll do!"

At that point the stranger, highly offended, spun round on the stool.

"Pardon me, but I'm in charge..." he began.

But Persikov shook a crooked finger at him and went on:

"Excuse me, but I just don't understand. In fact, I object categorically. I refuse to sanction any experiments with the eggs... Until I have tried them myself..."

Something croaked and rattled in the receiver, and even at a distance it was clear that the indulgent voice on the phone

was talking to a small child. In the end a purple-faced Persikov slammed down the receiver, shouting over it at the wall:

"I wash my hands of the whole business!"

Going back to the table, he picked up the warrant, read it once from top to bottom over his spectacles, then from bottom to top through them, and suddenly howled:

"Pankrat!"

Pankrat appeared in the doorway as if he had shot up through the trap-door in an opera. Persikov glared at him and barked:

"Go away, Pankrat!"

And Pankrat disappeared, his face not expressing the slightest surprise.

Then Persikov turned to the newcomer and said:

"I beg your pardon. I will obey. It's none of my business. And of no interest to me."

The newcomer was not so much offended as taken aback.

"Excuse me," he began, "but comrade..."

"Why do you keep saying comrade all the time," Persikov muttered, then fell silent.

"Well, I never," was written all over Feight's face.

"Pard..."

"Alright then, here you are," Persikov interrupted him. "See this arc lamp. From this you obtain by moving the eyepiece," Persikov clicked the lid of the chamber, like a camera, "a beam which you can collect by moving the lenses, number 1 here ... and the mirror, number 2." Persikov put the ray out, then lit it again on the floor of the asbestos chamber. "And on the floor you can put anything you like and experiment with it. Extremely simple, is it not?"

Persikov intended to express irony and contempt, but the newcomer was peering hard at the chamber with shining eyes and did not notice them.

"Only I warn you," Persikov went on. "You must not put your hands in the ray, because from my observations it causes growths of the epithelium. And whether they are malignant or not, I unfortunately have not yet had time to establish."

Hereupon the newcomer quickly put his hands behind his back, dropping his leather cap, and looked at the Professor's hands. They were stained with iodine, and the right hand was bandaged at the wrist.

"But what about you, Professor?"

"You can buy rubber gloves at Schwabe's on Kuznetsky," the Professor replied irritably. "I'm not obliged to worry about that."

At this point Persikov stared hard at the newcomer as if through a microscope.

"Where are you from? And why have you..."

Feight took offence at last.

"Pard..."

"But a person should know what he's doing! Why have you latched on to this ray?"

"Because it's a matter of the greatest importance..."

"Hm. The greatest importance? In that case... Pankrat!"

And when Pankrat appeared:

"Wait a minute, I must think."

Pankrat dutifully disappeared again.

"There's one thing I can't understand," said Persikov. "Why the need for all this speed and secrecy?"

"You've got me all muddled up, Professor," Feight replied. "You know there's not a single chicken left in the whole country."

"Well, what of it?" Persikov howled. "Surely you're not going to try and resurrect them all at the drop of a hat, are you? And why do you need this ray which hasn't been properly studied yet?"

"Comrade Professor," Feight replied, "you've got me all muddled, honest you have. I'm telling you that we must put poultry-keeping back on its feet again, because they're writing all sorts of rotten things about us abroad. Yes."

"Well, let them..."

"Tut-tut," Feight replied enigmatically, shaking his head.

"Who on earth, I should like to know, would ever think of using the ray to hatch chickens..."

"Me," said Feight.

"Oh, I see. And why, if you don't mind my asking? How did you find out about the properties of the ray?"

"I was at your lecture, Professor."

"But I haven't done anything with the eggs yet! I'm only planning to!"

"It'll work alright, honest it will," said Feight suddenly with great conviction. "Your ray's so famous it could hatch elephants, not only chickens."

"Now listen here," Persikov said. "You're not a zoologist, are you? That's a pity. You would make a very bold experimenter. Yes, only you risk ... failure ... and you're taking up my time."

"We'll give the chambers back to you. Don't you worry!"

"When?"

"After I've hatched out the first batch."

"How confidently you said that! Very well! Pankrat!"

"I've brought some people with me," said Feight. "And a guard..."

By evening Persikov's study was desolate. The tables were empty. Feight's people took away the three big chambers, only leaving the Professor the first, the small one which he had used to begin the experiments.

The July dusk was falling. A greyness invaded the Institute, creeping along the corridors. Monotonous steps could be heard in the study. Persikov was pacing the large room from window to door, in the dark... And strange though it may seem all the inmates of the Institute, and the animals too, were prey to a curious melancholy that evening. For some reason the toads gave a very mournful concert, croaking in a most sinister, ominous fashion. Pankrat had to chase a grass-snake that slipped out of its chamber, and when he caught it in the corridor the snake looked as if it would do anything just to get away from there.

Late that evening the bell from Persikov's study rang. Pankrat appeared on the threshold to be greeted by a strange sight. The scientist was standing alone in the middle of the study, staring at the tables. Pankrat coughed and froze to attention.

"There, Pankrat," said Persikov, pointing at the empty table.

Pankrat took fright. It looked in the dark as if the Professor had been crying. That was unusual, terrifying.

"Yessir," Pankrat replied plaintively, thinking, "If only you'd bawl at me!"

"There," Persikov repeated, and his lips trembled like a little boy's whose favourite toy has suddenly been taken away from him.

"You know, my dear Pankrat," Persikov went on, turning away to face the window. "My wife who left me fifteen years

ago and joined an operetta company has now apparently died... So there, Pankrat, dear chap... I got a letter..."

The toads croaked mournfully, and darkness slowly engulfed the Professor. Night was falling. Here and there white lamps went on in the windows. Pankrat stood to attention with fright, confused and miserable.

"You can go, Pankrat," the Professor said heavily, with a wave of the hand. "Go to bed, Pankrat, my dear fellow."

And so night fell. Pankrat left the study quickly on tiptoe for some reason, ran to his cubby-hole, rummaged among a pile of rags in the corner, pulled out an already opened bottle of vodka and gulped down a large glassful. Then he ate some bread and salt, and his eyes cheered up a bit.

Late that evening, just before midnight, Pankrat was sitting barefoot on a bench in the poorly lit vestibule, talking to the indefatigable bowler hat on duty and scratching his chest under a calico shirt.

"Honest, it would've been better if he'd done me in..."

"Was he really crying?" asked the bowler hat, inquisitively.

"Honest he was," Pankrat insisted.

"A great scientist," the bowler hat agreed. "A frog's no substitute for a wife, anyone knows that."

"It sure isn't," Pankrat agreed.

Then he paused and added:

"I'm thinking of bringing the wife up here... No sense her staying in the country. Only she couldn't stand them there reptiles..."

"I'm not surprised, the filthy things," agreed the bowler hat.

Not a sound could be heard from the Professor's study. The light was not on either. There was no strip under the door.

CHAPTER VIII

The Incident at the State Farm

There is no better time of the year than mid-August in Smolensk Province, say. The summer of 1928 was a splendid one, as we all know, with rains just at the right time in spring, a full hot sun, and a splendid harvest... The apples on the

former Sheremetev family estate were ripening, the forests were a lush green and the fields were squares of rich yellow... Man becomes nobler in the lap of nature. Alexander Semyonovich too did not seem quite as unpleasant as in the town. And he wasn't wearing that revolting jacket. His face had a bronze tan, the unbuttoned calico shirt revealed a chest thickly covered with black hair. He had canvas trousers on. And his eyes were calmer and kinder.

Alexander Semyonovich trotted excitedly down the colonnaded porch, which sported a notice with the words "Red Ray State Farm" under a star, and went straight to the truck that had just brought the three black chambers under escort.

All day Alexander Semyonovich worked hard with his assistants setting up the chambers in the former winter garden, the Sheremetevs' conservatory. By evening all was ready. A white frosted arc lamp shone under the glass roof, the chambers were set up on bricks and, after much tapping and turning of shining knobs, the mechanic who had come with the chambers produced the mysterious red ray on the asbestos floor in the black crates.

Alexander Semyonovich bustled about, climbing up the ladder himself and checking the wiring.

The next day the same truck came back from the station and spat out three boxes of magnificent smooth plywood stuck all over with labels and white notices on a black background that read:

"*Vorsicht: Eier!*"

"Eggs. Handle with care!"

"Why have they sent so few?" Alexander Semyonovich exclaimed in surprise and set about unpacking the eggs at once. The unpacking also took place in the conservatory with the participation of the following: Alexander Semyonovich himself, his unusually plump wife Manya, the one-eyed former gardener of the former Sheremetevs, who now worked for the state farm in the universal post of watchman, the guard doomed to live on the state farm, and the cleaning girl Dunya. It was not Moscow, and everything here was simpler, more friendly and more homely. Alexander Semyonovich gave the instructions, glancing avidly from time to time at the boxes which lay like some rich present under the gentle sunset glow from the upper panes in the conservatory. The guard, his rifle

dozing peacefully by the door, was ripping open the braces and metal bands with a pair of pliers. There was a sound of cracking wood. Clouds of dust rose up. Alexander Semyonovich padded around in his sandals, fussing by the boxes.

"Gently does it," he said to the guard. "Be careful. Can't you see it's eggs?"

"Don't worry," croaked the provincial warrior, bashing away happily. "Won't be a minute..."

Wrr-ench. Down came another shower of dust.

The eggs were beautifully packed: first came sheets of waxed paper under the wooden top, next some blotting paper, then a thick layer of wood shavings and finally the sawdust in which the white egg-tops nestled.

"Foreign packing," said Alexander Semyonovich lovingly, rummaging around in the sawdust. "Not the way we do it. Careful, Manya, or you'll break them."

"Have you gone daft, Alexander Semyonovich," replied his wife. "What's so special about this lot? Think I've never seen eggs before? Oh, what big ones!"

"Foreign," said Alexander Semyonovich, laying the eggs out on the wooden table. "Not like our poor old peasant eggs. Bet they're all brahmaputras, the devil take them! German..."

"I should say so," the guard agreed, admitting the eggs.

"Only why are they so dirty?" Alexander Semyonovich mused thoughtfully. "Keep an eye on things, Manya. Tell them to go on unloading. I'm going off to make a phone call."

And Alexander Semyonovich went to use the telephone in the farm office across the yard.

That evening the phone rang in the laboratory at the Zoological Institute. Professor Persikov tousled his hair and went to answer it.

"Yes?" he asked.

"There's a call for you from the provinces," a female voice hissed quietly down the receiver.

"Well, put it through then," said Persikov disdainfully into the black mouthpiece. After a bit of crackling a far-off male voice asked anxiously in his ear:

"Should the eggs be washed, Professor?"

"What's that? What? What did you say?" snapped Persikov irritably. "Where are you speaking from?"

"Nikolskoye, Smolensk Province," the receiver replied.

"Don't understand. Never heard of it. Who's that speaking?"

"Feight," the receiver said sternly.

"What Feight? Ah, yes. It's you. What did you want to know?"

"Whether to wash them. They've sent a batch of chicken eggs from abroad..."

"Well?"

"But they're all mucky..."

"You must be wrong. How can they be 'mucky', as you put it? Well, of course, maybe a few, er, droppings got stuck to them, or something of the sort."

"So what about washing them?"

"No need at all, of course. Why, are you putting the eggs into the chambers already?"

"Yes, I am," the receiver replied.

"Hm," Persikov grunted.

"So long," the receiver clattered and fell silent.

"So long," Persikov repeated distastefully to Docent Ivanov. "How do you like that character, Pyotr Stepanovich?"

Ivanov laughed.

"So it was him, was it? I can imagine what he'll concoct out of those eggs."

"Ye-e-es," Persikov began maliciously. "Just think, Pyotr Stepanovich. Well, of course, it's highly possible that the ray will have the same effect on the deuteroplasma of a chicken egg as on the plasma of amphibians. It is also highly possible that he will hatch out chickens. But neither you nor I can say precisely what sort of chickens they will be. They may be of no earthly use to anyone. They may die after a day or two. Or they may be inedible. And can I even guarantee that they'll be able to stand up. Perhaps they'll have brittle bones." Persikov got excited, waved his hand and crooked his fingers.

"Quite so," Ivanov agreed.

"Can you guarantee, Pyotr Stepanovich, that they will be able to reproduce? Perhaps that character will hatch out sterile chickens. He'll make them as big as a dog, and they won't have any chicks until kingdom come."

"Precisely," Ivanov agreed.

"And such nonchalance," Persikov was working himself into a fury. "Such perkiness! And kindly note that I was asked

to instruct that scoundrel." Persikov pointed to the warrant delivered by Feight (which was lying on the experimental table). "But how am I to instruct that ignoramus when I myself can say nothing about the question?"

"Couldn't you have refused?" asked Ivanov.

Persikov turned purple, snatched up the warrant and showed it to Ivanov who read it and gave an ironic smile.

"Yes, I see," he said significantly.

"And kindly note also that I've been expecting my shipment for two months, and there's still no sign of it. But that rascal got his eggs straightaway and all sorts of assistance."

"It won't do him any good, Vladimir Ipatych. In the end they'll just give you back your chambers."

"Well, let's hope it's soon, because they're holding up my experiments."

"Yes, that's dreadful. I've got everything ready."

"Has the protective clothing arrived?"

"Yes, today."

Persikov was somewhat reassured by this and brightened up.

"Then I think we'll proceed like this. We can close the doors of the operating-room tight and open up the windows."

"Of course," Ivanov agreed.

"Three helmets?"

"Yes, three."

"Well then, that's you and me, and we'll ask one of the students. He can have the third helmet."

"Grinmut would do."

"That's the one you've got working on salamanders, isn't it? Hm, he's not bad, but, if you don't mind my saying so, last spring he didn't know the difference between a Pseudotyphlops and a Platyplecturus," Persikov added with rancour.

"But he's not bad. He's a good student," Ivanov defended him.

"We'll have to go without sleep completely for one night," Persikov went on. "Only you must check the gas, Pyotr Stepanovich. The devil only knows what it's like. That Volunteer-Chem lot might send us some rubbish."

"No, no," Ivanov waved his hands. "I tested it yesterday. You must give them some credit, Vladimir Ipatych, the gas is excellent."

"What did you try it on?"

"Some common toads. You just spray them with it and they die instantly. And another thing, Vladimir Ipatych. Write and ask the GPU to send you an electric revolver."

"But I don't know how to use it."

"I'll see to that," Ivanov replied. "We tried one out on the Klyazma, just for fun. There was a GPU chap living next to me. It's a wonderful thing. And incredibly efficient. Kills outright at a hundred paces without making a sound. We were shooting ravens. I don't even think we'll need the gas."

"Hm, that's a bright idea. Very bright." Persikov went into the corner, lifted the receiver and barked:

"Give me that, what's it called, Lubyanka."

* * *

The weather was unusually hot. You could see the rich transparent heat shimmering over the fields. But the nights were wonderful, green and deceptive. The moon made the former estate of the Sheremetevs look too beautiful for words. The palace-cum-state farm glistened as if it were made of sugar, shadows quivered in the park, and the ponds had two different halves, one a slanting column of light, the other fathomless darkness. In the patches of moonlight you could easily read *Izvestia*, except for the chess section which was in small nonpareil. But on nights like these no one read *Izvestia*, of course. Dunya the cleaner was in the woods behind the state farm and as coincidence would have it, the ginger-moustached driver of the farm's battered truck happened to be there too. What they were doing there no one knows. They were sheltering in the unreliable shade of an elm tree, on the driver leather coat which was spread out on the ground. A lamp shone in the kitchen, where the two market-gardeners were having supper, and Madame Feight was sitting in a white négligé on the columned veranda, gazing at the beautiful moon and dreaming.

At ten o'clock in the evening when the sounds had died down in the village of Kontsovka behind the state farm, the idyllic landscape was filled with the charming gentle playing of a flute. This fitted in with the groves and former columns of the Sheremetev palace more than words can say. In the duet

the voice of the delicate Liza from *The Queen of Spades* blended with that of the passionate Polina and soared up into the moonlit heights like a vision of the old and yet infinitely dear, heartbreakingly entrancing regime.

Do fade away ... Fade away...

piped the flute, trilling and sighing.

The copses were hushed, and Dunya, fatal as a wood nymph, listened, her cheek pressed against the rough, ginger and manly cheek of the driver.

"He don't play bad, the bastard," said the driver, putting a manly arm round Dunya's waist.

The flute was being played by none other than the manager of the state farm himself, Alexander Semyonovich Feight, who, to do him justice, was playing it beautifully. The fact of the matter was that Alexander Semyonovich had once specialised in the flute. Right up to 1917 he had played in the well-known concert ensemble of the maestro Petukhov, filling the foyer of the cosy little Magic Dreams cinema in the town of Yekaterinoslav with its sweet notes every evening. But the great year of 1917, which broke the careers of so many, had swept Alexander Semyonovich onto a new path too. He left the Magic Dreams and the dusty star-spangled satin of its foyer to plunge into the open sea of war and revolution, exchanging his flute for a death-dealing Mauser. For a long time he was tossed about on waves which washed him ashore, now in the Crimea, now in Moscow, now in Turkestan, and even in Vladivostok. It needed the revolution for Alexander Semyonovich to realise his full potential. It turned out that here was a truly great man, who should not be allowed to waste his talents in the foyer of Magic Dreams, of course. Without going into unnecessary detail, we shall merely say that the year before, 1927, and the beginning of 1928 had found Alexander Semyonovich in Turkestan where he first edited a big newspaper and then, as a local member of the Supreme Economic Commission, became renowned for his remarkable contribution to the irrigation of Turkestan. In 1928 Feight came to Moscow and received some well-deserved leave. The Supreme Commission of the organisation, whose membership card this provincially old-fashioned

man carried with honour in his pocket, appreciated his qualities and appointed him to a quiet and honorary post. Alas and alack! To the great misfortune of the Republic, Alexander Semyonovich's seething brain did not quieten down. In Moscow Feight learned of Persikov's discovery, and in the rooms of Red Paris in Tverskaya Street Alexander Semyonovich had the brainwave of using the ray to restore the Republic's poultry in a month. The Animal Husbandry Commission listened to what he had to say, agreed with him, and Feight took his warrant to the eccentric scientist.

The concert over the glassy waters, the grove and the park was drawing to a close, when something happened to cut it short. The dogs in Kontsovka, who should have been fast asleep by then, suddenly set up a frenzied barking, which gradually turned into an excruciating general howl. The howl swelled up, drifting over the fields, and was answered by a high-pitched concert from the million frogs on the ponds. All this was so ghastly, that for a moment the mysterious enchanted night seemed to fade away.

Alexander Semyonovich put down his flute and went onto the veranda.

"Hear that, Manya? It's those blasted dogs... What do you think set them off like that?"

"How should I know?" she replied, gazing at the moon.

"Hey, Manya, let's go and take a look at the eggs," Alexander Semyonovich suggested.

"For goodness sake, Alexander Semyonovich. You're darned crazy about those eggs and chickens. Have a rest for a bit."

"No, Manya, let's go."

A bright light was burning in the conservatory. Dunya came in too with a burning face and shining eyes. Alexander Semyonovich opened the observation windows carefully, and they all began peeping into the chambers. On the white asbestos floor lay neat rows of bright-red eggs with spots on them. There was total silence in the chambers, except for the hissing of the 15,000 candle-power light overhead.

"I'll hatch those chicks out alright!" exclaimed Alexander Semyonovich excitedly, looking now through the observation windows at the side, now through the wide ventilation hatches overhead. "You'll see. Eh? Don't you think so?"

"You know what, Alexander Semyonovich," said Dunya, smiling. "The men in Kontsovka think you're the Antichrist. They say your eggs are from the devil. It's a sin to hatch eggs with machines. They want to kill you."

Alexander Semyonovich shuddered and turned to his wife. His face had gone yellow.

"Well, how about that? Ignorant lot! What can you do with people like that? Eh? We'll have to fix up a meeting for them, Manya. I'll phone the district centre tomorrow for some Party workers. And I'll give 'em a speech myself. This place needs a bit of working over alright. Stuck away at the back of beyond..."

"Thick as posts," muttered the guard, who had settled down on his greatcoat in the conservatory doorway.

The next day was heralded by some strange and inexplicable events. In the early morning, at the first glint of sunlight, the groves, which usually greeted the heavenly body with a strong and unceasing twitter of birds, met it with total silence. This was noticed by absolutely everybody. It was like the calm before a storm. But no storm followed. Conversations at the state farm took on a strange and sinister note for Alexander Semyonovich, especially because according to the well-known Kontsovka trouble-maker and sage nicknamed Goat Gob, all the birds had gathered in flocks and flown away northwards from Sheremetevo at dawn, which was quite ridiculous. Alexander Semyonovich was most upset and spent the whole day putting a phone call through to the town of Grachevka. Eventually they promised to send him in a few days' time two speakers on two subjects, the international situation and the question of Volunteer-Fowl.

The evening brought some more surprises. Whereas in the morning the woods had fallen silent, showing clearly how suspiciously unpleasant it was when the trees were quiet, and whereas by midday the sparrows from the state farmyard had also flown off somewhere, that evening there was not a sound from the Sheremetevka pond either. This was quite extraordinary, because everyone for twenty miles around was familiar with the croaking of the Sheremetev frogs. But now they seemed to be extinct. There was not a single voice from the pond, and the sedge was silent. It must be confessed that this really upset Alexander Semyonovich. People had begun to

talk about these happenings in a most unpleasant fashion, i.e., behind his back.

"It really is strange," said Alexander Semyonovich to his wife at lunch. "I can't understand why those birds had to go and fly away."

"How should I know?" Manya replied. "Perhaps it's because of your ray."

"Don't be so silly, Manya!" exclaimed Alexander Semyonovich, flinging down his spoon. "You're as bad as the peasants. What's the ray got to do with it?"

"I don't know. Stop pestering me."

That evening brought the third surprise. The dogs began howling again in Kontsovka and how! Their endless whines and angry, mournful yelping wafted over the moonlit fields.

Alexander Semyonovich rewarded himself somewhat with yet another surprise, a pleasant one this time, in the conservatory. A constant tapping had begun inside the red eggs in the chambers. "Tappity-tappity-tappity," came from one, then another, then a third.

The tapping in the eggs was a triumph for Alexander Semyonovich. The strange events in the woods and on the pond were immediately forgotten. Everyone gathered in the conservatory, Manya, Dunya, the watchman and the guard, who left his rifle by the door.

"Well, then? What about that?" asked Alexander Semyonovich triumphantly. Everyone put their ears eagerly to the doors of the first chamber. "That's them tapping with their little beaks, the chickens," Alexander Semyonovich went on, beaming. "So you thought I wouldn't hatch out any chicks, did you? Well, you were wrong, my hearties." From an excess of emotion he slapped the guard on the shoulder. "I'll hatch chickens that'll take your breath away. Only now I must keep alert," he added strictly. "Let me know as soon as they start hatching."

"Right you are," replied the watchman, Dunya and the guard in a chorus.

"Tappity-tappity-tappity," went one egg, then another, in the first chamber. In fact this on-the-spot spectacle of new life being born in a thin shining shell was so intriguing that they all sat for a long time on the upturned empty crates, watching the crimson eggs mature in the mysterious glimmering light. By

the time they went to bed it was quite late and a greenish night had spread over the farm and the surrounding countryside. The night was mysterious, one might even say frightening, probably because its total silence was broken now and then by the abject, excruciating howls of the dogs in Kontsovka. What on earth had got into those blasted dogs no one could say.

An unpleasant surprise awaited Alexander Semyonovich the next morning. The guard was extremely upset and kept putting his hands on his heart, swearing that he had not fallen asleep but had noticed nothing.

"I can't understand it," the guard insisted. "It's through no fault of mine, Comrade Feight."

"Very grateful to you, I'm sure," retorted Alexander Semyonovich heatedly. "What do you think, comrade? Why were you put on guard? To keep an eye on things. So tell me where they are. They've hatched out, haven't they? So they must have run away. That means you must have left the door open and gone off somewhere. Get me those chickens!"

"Where could I have gone? I know my job." The guard took offence. "Don't you go accusing me unfairly, Comrade Feight!"

"Then where are they?"

"How the blazes should I know!" the guard finally exploded. "I'm not supposed to guard them, am I? Why was I put on duty? To see that nobody pinched the chambers, and that's what I've done. Your chambers are safe and sound. But there's no law that says I must chase after your chickens. Goodness only knows what they'll be like. Maybe you won't be able to catch them on a bicycle."

This somewhat deflated Alexander Semyonovich. He muttered something else, then relapsed into a state of perplexity. It was a strange business indeed. In the first chamber, which had been switched on before the others, the two eggs at the very base of the ray had broken open. One of them had even rolled to one side. The empty shell was lying on the asbestos floor in the ray.

"The devil only knows," muttered Alexander Semyonovich. "The windows are closed and they couldn't have flown away over the roof, could they?"

He threw back his head and looked at some big holes in the glass roof.

"Of course, they couldn't, Alexander Semyonovich!" exclaimed Dunya in surprise. "Chickens can't fly. They must be here somewhere. Chuck, chuck, chuck," she called, peering into the corners of the conservatory, which were cluttered with dusty flower pots, bits of boards and other rubbish. But no chicks answered her call.

The whole staff spent about two hours running round the farmyard, looking for the runaway chickens and found nothing. The day passed in great excitement. The duty guard on the chambers was reinforced by the watchman, who had strict orders to look through the chamber windows every quarter of an hour and call Alexander Semyonovich if anything happened. The guard sat huffily by the door, holding his rifle between his knees. What with all the worry Alexander Semyonovich did not have lunch until nearly two. After lunch he slept for an hour or so in the cool shade on the former Sheremetev ottoman, had a refreshing drink of the farm's *kvass* and slipped into the conservatory to make sure everything was alright. The old watchman was lying on his stomach on some bast matting and staring through the observation window of the first chamber. The guard was keeping watch by the door.

But there was a piece of news: the eggs in the third chamber, which had been switched on last, were making a kind of gulping, hissing sound, as if something inside them were whimpering.

"They're hatching out alright," said Alexander Semyonovich. "That's for sure. See?" he said to the watchman.

"Aye, it's most extraordinary," the latter replied in a most ambiguous tone, shaking his head.

Alexander Semyonovich squatted by the chambers for a while, but nothing hatched out. So he got up, stretched and announced that he would not leave the grounds, but was going for a swim in the pond and must be called if there were any developments. He went into the palace to his bedroom with its two narrow iron bedsteads, rumpled bedclothes and piles of green apples and millet on the floor for the newly-hatched chickens, took a towel and, on reflection, his flute as well to play at leisure over the still waters. Then he ran quickly out of the palace, across the farmyard and down the willow-lined path to the pond. He walked briskly, swinging the towel,

with the flute under his arm. The sky shimmered with heat through the willows, and his aching body begged to dive into the water. On the right of Feight began a dense patch of burdock, into which he spat *en passant*. All at once there was a rustling in the tangle of big leaves, as if someone was dragging a log. With a sudden sinking feeling in his stomach, Alexander Semyonovich turned his head towards the burdock in surprise. There had not been a sound from the pond for two days. The rustling stopped, and above the burdock the smooth surface of the pond flashed invitingly with the grey roof of the changing hut. Some dragon-flies darted to and fro in front of Alexander Semyonovich. He was about to turn off to the wooden platform, when there was another rustle in the burdock accompanied this time by a short hissing like steam coming out of an engine. Alexander Semyonovich tensed and stared at the dense thicket of weeds.

At that moment the voice of Feight's wife rang out, and her white blouse flashed in and out through the raspberry bushes. "Wait for me, Alexander Semyonovich. I'm coming for a swim too."

His wife was hurrying to the pond, but Alexander Semyonovich's eyes were riveted on the burdock and he did not reply. A greyish olive-coloured log had begun to rise out of the thicket, growing ever bigger before his horrified gaze. The log seemed to be covered with wet yellowish spots. It began to straighten up, bending and swaying, and was so long that it reached above a short gnarled willow. Then the top of the log cracked, bent down slightly, and something about the height of a Moscow electric lamp-post loomed over Alexander Semyonovich. Only this something was about three times thicker that a lamp-post and far more beautiful because of its scaly tattooing. Completely mystified, but with shivers running down his spine, Alexander Semyonovich looked at the top of this terrifying lamp-post, and his heart almost stopped beating. He turned to ice on the warm August day, and everything went dark before his eyes as if he were looking at the sun through his summer trousers.

On the tip of the log was a head. A flattened, pointed head adorned with a round yellow spot on an olive background. In the roof of the head sat a pair of lidless icy narrow eyes, and these eyes glittered with indescribable malice. The head

moved as if spitting air and the whole post slid back into the burdock, leaving only the eyes which glared at Alexander Semyonovich without blinking. Drenched with sweat, the latter uttered five incredible fear-crazed words. So piercing were the eyes between the leaves.

"What the devil's going on..."

Then he remembered about fakirs... Yes, yes, in India, a wicker basket and a picture. Snake-charming.

The head reared up again, and the body began to uncoil. Alexander Semyonovich raised his flute to his lips, gave a hoarse squeak and, gasping for breath, began to play the waltz from *Eugene Onegin*. The eyes in the burdock lit up at once with implacable hatred for the opera.

"Are you crazy, playing in this heat?" came Manya's cheerful voice, and out of the corner of his eye Alexander Semyonovich glimpsed a patch of white.

Then a terrible scream shattered the farm, swelling, rising, and the waltz began to limp painfully. The head shot out of the burdock, its eyes leaving Alexander Semyonovich's soul to repent of his sins. A snake about thirty feet long and as thick as a man uncoiled like a spring and shot out of the weeds. Clouds of dust sprayed up from the path, and the waltz ceased. The snake raced past the state farm manager straight to the white blouse. Feight saw everything clearly: Manya went a yellowish-white, and her long hair rose about a foot above her head like wire. Before Feight's eyes the snake opened its mouth, something fork-like darting out, then sank its teeth into the shoulder of Manya, who was sinking into the dust, and jerked her up about two feet above the ground. Manya gave another piercing death cry. The snake coiled itself into a twelve-yard screw, its tail sweeping up a tornado, and began to crush Manya. She did not make another sound. Feight could hear her bones crunching. High above the ground rose Manya's head pressed lovingly against the snake's cheek. Blood gushed out of her mouth, a broken arm dangled in the air and more blood spurted out from under the fingernails. Then the snake opened its mouth, put its gaping jaws over Manya's head and slid onto the rest of her like a glove slipping onto a finger. The snake's breath was so hot that Feight could feel it on his face, and the tail all but swept him off the path into the acrid dust. It was then that Feight

went grey. First the left, then the right half of his jet-black head turned to silver. Nauseated to death, he eventually managed to drag himself away from the path, then turned and ran, seeing nothing and nobody, with a wild shriek that echoed for miles around.

CHAPTER IX

A Writhing Mass

Shukin, the GPU agent at Dugino Station, was a very brave man. He said thoughtfully to his companion, the ginger-headed Polaitis:

"Well, let's go. Eh? Get the motorbike." Then he paused for a moment and added, turning to the man who was sitting on the bench: "Put the flute down."

But instead of putting down the flute, the trembling grey-haired man on the bench in the Dugino GPU office, began weeping and moaning. Shukin and Polaitis realised they would have to pull the flute away. His fingers seemed to be stuck to it. Shukin, who possessed enormous, almost circus-like strength, prised the fingers away one by one. Then they put the flute on the table.

It was early on the sunny morning of the day after Manya's death.

"You come too," Shukin said to Alexander Semyonovich, "and show us where everything is." But Feight shrank back from him in horror, putting up his hands as if to ward off some terrible vision.

"You must show us," Polaitis added sternly.

"Leave him alone. You can see the state he's in."

"Send me to Moscow," begged Alexander Semyonovich, weeping.

"You really don't want to go back to the farm again?"

Instead of replying Feight shielded himself with his hands again, his eyes radiating horror.

"Alright then," decided Shukin. "You're really not in a fit state... I can see that. There's an express train leaving shortly, you can go on it."

While the station watchman helped Alexander Semyono-

vich, whose teeth were chattering on the battered blue mug to have a drink of water, Shukin and Polaitis conferred together. Polaitis took the view that nothing had happened. But that Feight was mentally ill and it had all been a terrible hallucination. Shukin, however, was inclined to believe that a boa constrictor had escaped from the circus on tour in the town of Grachevka. The sound of their doubting whispers made Feight rise to his feet. He had recovered somewhat and said, raising his hands like an Old Testament prophet:

"Listen to me. Listen. Why don't you believe me? I saw it. Where is my wife?"

Shukin went silent and serious and immediately sent off a telegram to Grachevka. On Shukin's instructions, a third agent began to stick closely to Alexander Semyonovich and was to accompany him to Moscow. Shukin and Polaitis got ready for the journey. They only had one electric revolver, but it was good protection. A 1927 model, the pride of French technology for shooting at close range, could kill at a mere hundred paces, but had a range of two metres in diameter and within this range any living thing was exterminated outright. It was very hard to miss. Shukin put on this shiny electric toy, while Polaitis armed himself with an ordinary light machine-gun, then they took some ammunition and raced off on the motorbike along the main road through the early morning dew and chill to the state farm. The motorbike covered the twelve miles between the station and the farm in a quarter of an hour (Feight had walked all night, occasionally hiding in the grass by the wayside in spasms of mortal terror), and when the sun began to get hot, the sugar palace with columns appeared amid the trees on the hill overlooking the winding River Top. There was a deathly silence all around. At the beginning of the turning up to the state farm the agents overtook a peasant on a cart. He was riding along at a leisurely pace with a load of sacks, and was soon left far behind. The motorbike drove over the bridge, and Polaitis sounded the horn to announce their arrival. But this elicited no response whatsoever, except from some distant frenzied dogs in Kontsovka. The motorbike slowed down as it approached the gates with verdigris lions. Covered with dust, the agents in yellow gaiters dismounted, padlocked their motorbike to the iron railings and went into the yard. The silence was eery.

"Hey, anybody around?" shouted Shukin loudly.

But no one answered his deep voice. The agents walked round the yard, growing more and more mystified. Polaitis was scowling. Shukin began to search seriously, his fair eyebrows knit in a frown. They looked through an open window into the kitchen and saw that it was empty, but the floor was covered with broken bits of white china.

"Something really has happened to them, you know. I can see it now. Some catastrophe," Polaitis said.

"Anybody there? Hey!" shouted Shukin, but the only reply was an echo from the kitchen vaults. "The devil only knows! It couldn't have gobbled them all up, could it? Perhaps they've run off somewhere. Let's go into the house."

The front door with the colonnaded veranda was wide open. The palace was completely empty inside. The agents even climbed up to the attic, knocking and opening all the doors, but they found nothing and went out again into the yard through the deserted porch.

"We'll walk round the outside to the conservatory," Shukin said. "We'll give that a good going over and we can phone from there too."

The agents set off along the brick path, past the flowerbeds and across the backyard, at which point the conservatory came into sight.

"Wait a minute," whispered Shukin, unbuckling his revolver. Polaitis tensed and took his machine-gun in both hands. A strange, very loud noise was coming from the conservatory and somewhere behind it. It was like the sound of a steam engine. "Zzzz-zzzz," the conservatory hissed.

"Careful now,", whispered Shukin, and trying not to make a sound the agents stole up to the glass walls and peered into the conservatory.

Polaitis immediately recoiled, his face white as a sheet. Shukin froze, mouth open and revolver in hand.

The conservatory was a terrible writhing mass. Huge snakes slithered across the floor, twisting and intertwining, hissing and uncoiling, swinging and shaking their heads. The broken shells on the floor crunched under their bodies. Overhead a powerful electric lamp shone palely, casting an eery cinematographic light over the inside of the conservatory. On the floor lay three huge photographic-like chambers, two of

which were dark and had been pushed aside, but a small deep-red patch of light glowed in the third. Snakes of all sizes were crawling over the cables, coiling round the frames and climbing through the holes in the roof. From the electric lamp itself hung a jet-black spotted snake several yards long, its head swinging like a pendulum. There was an occasional rattle amid the hissing, and a strange putrid pond-like smell wafted out of the conservatory. The agents could just make out piles of white eggs in the dusty corners, an enormous long-legged bird lying motionless by the chambers and the body of a man in grey by the door, with a rifle next to him.

"Get back!" shouted Shukin and began to retreat, pushing Polaitis with his left hand and raising his revolver with his right. He managed to fire nine hissing shots which cast flashes of green lightning all round. The noise swelled terribly as in response to Shukin's shots the whole conservatory was galvanised into frantic motion, and flat heads appeared in all the holes. Peals of thunder began to roll over the farm and echo on the walls. "Rat-tat-tat-tat," Polaitis fired, retreating backwards. There was a strange four-footed shuffling behind him. Polaitis suddenly gave an awful cry and fell to the ground. A brownish-green creature on bandy legs, with a huge pointed head and a cristate tail, like an enormous lizard, had slithered out from behind the barn, given Polaitis a vicious bite in the leg, and knocked him over.

"Help!" shouted Polaitis. His left arm was immediately snapped up and crunched by a pair of jaws, while his right, which he tried in vain to lift, trailed the machine-gun over the ground. Shukin turned round in confusion. He managed to fire once, but the shot went wide, because he was afraid of hitting his companion. The second time he fired in the direction of the conservatory, because amid the smaller snake-heads a huge olive one on an enormous body had reared up and was slithering straight towards him. The shot killed the giant snake, and Shukin hopped and skipped round Polaitis, already half-dead in the crocodile's jaws, trying to find the right spot to shoot the terrible monster without hitting the agent. In the end he succeeded. The electric revolver fired twice, lighting up everything around with a greenish flash, and the crocodile shuddered and stretched out rigid, letting go of Polaitis. Blood gushed out of his sleeve and mouth. He col-

lapsed onto his sound right arm, dragging his broken left leg. He was sinking fast.

"Get out ... Shukin," he sobbed.

Shukin fired a few more shots in the direction of the conservatory, smashing several panes of glass. But behind him a huge olive-coloured coil sprang out of a cellar window, slithered over the yard, covering it entirely with its ten-yard-long body and wound itself round Shukin's legs in a flash. It dashed him to the ground, and the shiny revolver bounced away. Shukin screamed with all his might, then choked, as the coils enfolded all of him except his head. Another coil swung round his head, ripping off the scalp, and the skull cracked. No more shots were heard in the farm. Everything was drowned by the all-pervading hissing. In reply to the hissing the wind wafted distant howls from Kontsovka, only now it was hard to say who was howling, dogs or people.

CHAPTER X

Catastrophe

In the editorial office of *Izvestia* the lights were shining brightly, and the fat duty editor was laying out the second column with telegrams "Around the Union Republics". One galley caught his eye. He looked at it through his pince-nez and laughed, then called the proof-readers and the maker-up and showed them it. On the narrow strip of damp paper they read:

"Grachevka, Smolensk Province. A hen that is as big as a horse and kicks like a horse has appeared in the district. It has bourgeois lady's feathers instead of a tail."

The compositors laughed themselves silly.

"In my day," said the duty editor, chuckling richly, "when I was working for Vanya Sytin on *The Russian Word* they used to see elephants when they got sozzled. That's right. Now it's ostriches."

The compositors laughed.

"Yes, of course, it's an ostrich," said the maker-up. "Shall we put it in, Ivan Vonifatievich?"

"Are you crazy?" the editor replied. "I'm surprised the sec-

retary let it through. It was written under the influence alright."

"Yes, they must have had a drop or two," agreed the compositors, and the maker-up removed the ostrich report from the desk.

So it was that *Izvestia* came out next day containing, as usual, a mass of interesting material but no mention whatsoever of the Grachevka ostrich. Docent Ivanov, who was conscientiously reading *Izvestia* in his office, rolled it up and yawned, muttering: "Nothing of interest," then put on his white coat. A little later the Bunsen burners went on in his room and the frogs started croaking. In Professor Persikov's room, however, there was hell let loose. The petrified Pankrat stood stiffly to attention.

"Yessir, I will," he was saying.

Persikov handed him a sealed packet and told him:

"Go at once to the head of the Husbandry Department, and tell him straight that he's a swine. Tell him that I said so. And give him this packet."

"That's a nice little errand and no mistake," thought the pale-faced Pankrat and disappeared with the packet.

Persikov fumed angrily.

"The devil only knows what's going on," he raged, pacing up and down the office and rubbing his gloved hands. "It's making a mockery of me and zoology. They're bringing him pile upon pile of those blasted chicken eggs, when I've been waiting two months for what I really need. America's not that far away! It's sheer inefficiency! A real disgrace!" He began counting on his fingers. "Catching them takes, say, ten days at the most, alright then, fifteen, well, certainly not more than twenty, plus two days to get them to London, and another one from London to Berlin. And from Berlin it's only six hours to get here. It's an utter disgrace!"

He snatched up the phone in a rage and began ringing someone.

Everything in his laboratory was ready for some mysterious and highly dangerous experiments. There were strips of paper to seal up the doors, divers' helmets with snorkels and several cylinders shining like mercury with labels saying "Volunteer-Chem" and "Do not touch" plus the drawing of a skull and cross-bones on the label.

It took at least three hours for the Professor to calm down and get on with some minor jobs. Which is what he did. He worked at the Institute until eleven in the evening and therefore had no idea what was happening outside its cream-painted walls. Neither the absurd rumours circulating around Moscow about terrible dragons, nor the newsboys' shouts about a strange telegram in the evening paper reached his ears. Docent Ivanov had gone to see *Tsar Fyodor Ivanovich* at the Arts Theatre, so there was no one to tell the Professor the news.

Around midnight Persikov arrived at Prechistenka and went to bed, where he read an English article in the Zoological Proceedings received from London. Then he fell asleep, like the rest of late-night Moscow. The only thing that did not sleep was the big grey building set back in Tverskaya Street where the *Izvestia* rotary presses clattered noisily, shaking the whole block. There was an incredible din and confusion in the office of the duty editor. He was rampaging around with bloodshot eyes like a madman, not knowing what to do, and sending everyone to the devil. The maker-up followed close on his heels, breathing out wine fumes and saying:

"It can't be helped, Ivan Vonifatievich. Let them bring out a special supplement tomorrow. We can't take the paper off the presses now."

Instead of going home, the compositors clustered together reading the telegrams that were now arriving in a steady stream, every fifteen minutes or so, each more eerie and disturbing than the one before. Alfred Bronsky's pointed hat flashed by in the blinding pink light of the printing office, and the fat man with the artificial leg scraped and hobbled around. Doors slammed in the entrance and reporters kept dashing up all night. The printing office's twelve telephones were busy non-stop, and the exchange almost automatically replied to the mysterious calls by giving the engaged signal, while the signal horns beeped constantly before the sleepless eyes of the lady telephonists.

The compositors had gathered round the metal-legged ocean-going captain, who was saying to them:

"They'll have to send aeroplanes with gas."

"They will and all," replied the compositors. "It's a downright disgrace, it is!" Then the air rang with foul curses and a shrill voice cried:

"That Persikov should be shot!"

"What's Persikov got to do with it?" said someone in the crowd. "It's that son-of-a-bitch at the farm who should be shot."

"There should have been a guard!" someone shouted.

"Perhaps it's not the eggs at all."

The whole building thundered and shook from the rotary machines, and it felt as if the ugly grey block was blazing in an electrical conflagration.

Far from ceasing with the break of a new day, the pandemonium grew more intense than ever, although the electric lights went out. One after another motorbikes and automobiles raced into the asphalted courtyard. All Moscow rose to don white sheets of newspapers like birds. They fluttered down and rustled in everyone's hands. By eleven a.m. the newspaper-boys had sold out, although that month they were printing a million and a half copies of each issue of *Izvestia*. Professor Persikov took the bus from Prechistenka to the Institute. There he was greeted by some news. In the vestibule stood three wooden crates neatly bound with metal strips and covered with foreign labels in German, over which someone had chalked in Russian: "Eggs. Handle with care!"

The Professor was overjoyed.

"At last!" he cried. "Open the crates at once, Pankrat, only be careful not to damage the eggs. And bring them into my office."

Pankrat carried out these instructions straightaway, and a quarter of an hour later in the Professor's office, strewn with sawdust and scraps of paper, a voice began shouting angrily.

"Are they trying to make fun of me?" the Professor howled, shaking his fists and waving a couple of eggs. "That Porosyuk's a real beast. I won't be treated like this. What do you think they are, Pankrat?"

"Eggs, sir," Pankrat replied mournfully.

"Chicken eggs, see, the devil take them! What good are they to me? They should be sent to that rascal on his state farm!"

Persikov rushed to the phone, but did not have time to make a call.

"Vladimir Ipatych! Vladimir Ipatych!" Ivanov's voice called urgently down the Institute's corridor.

Persikov put down the phone and Pankrat hopped aside to make way for the docent. The latter hurried into the office and, contrary to his usual gentlemanly practice, did not even remove the grey hat sitting on his head. In his hand he held a newspaper.

"Do you know what's happened, Vladimir Ipatych?" he cried, waving before Persikov's face a sheet with the headline "Special Supplement" and a bright coloured picture in the middle.

"Just listen to what they've done!" Persikov shouted back at him, not listening. "They've sent me some chicken eggs as a nice surprise. That Porosyuk's a positive cretin, just look!"

Ivanov stopped short. He stared in horror at the open crates, then at the newspaper, and his eyes nearly popped out of his head.

"So that's it," he gasped. "Now I understand. Take a look at this, Vladimir Ipatych." He quickly unfolded the paper and pointed with trembling fingers at the coloured picture. It showed an olive-coloured snake with yellow spots swaying like terrible fire hose in strange smudgy foliage. It had been taken from a light aeroplane flying cautiously over the snake. "What is that in your opinion, Vladimir Ipatych?"

Persikov pushed the spectacles onto his forehead, then pulled them back onto his nose, stared at the photograph and said in great surprise:

"Well, I'll be damned. It's ... it's an anaconda. A boa constrictor..."

Ivanov pulled off his hat, sat down on a chair and said, banging the table with his fist to emphasise each word:

"It's an anaconda from Smolensk Province, Vladimir Ipatych. What a monstrosity! That scoundrel has hatched out snakes instead of chickens, understand, and they are reproducing at the same fantastic rate as frogs!"

"What's that?" Persikov exclaimed, his face turning ashen. "You're joking, Pyotr Stepanovich. How could he have?"

Ivanov could say nothing for a moment, then regained the power of speech and said, poking a finger into the open crate where tiny white heads lay shining in the yellow sawdust:

"That's how."

"Wha-a-at?" Persikov howled, as the truth gradually dawned on him.

"You can be sure of it. They sent your order for snake and ostrich eggs to the state farm by mistake, and the chicken eggs to you."

"Good grief ... good grief," Persikov repeated, his face turning a greenish white as he sank down onto a stool.

Pankrat stood petrified by the door, pale and speechless. Ivanov jumped up, grabbed the newspaper and, pointing at the headline with a sharp nail, yelled into the Professor's ear:

"Now the fun's going to start alright! What will happen now, I simply can't imagine. Look here, Vladimir Ipatych." He yelled out the first passage to catch his eye on the crumpled newspaper: "The snakes are swarming in the direction of Mozhaisk ... laying vast numbers of eggs. Eggs have been discovered in Dukhovsky District... Crocodiles and ostriches have appeared. Special armed units ... and GPU detachments put an end to the panic in Vyazma by burning down stretches of forest outside the town and checking the reptiles' advance..."

With an ashen blotched face and demented eyes, Persikov rose from the stool and began to gasp:

"An anaconda! A boa constrictor! Good grief!" Neither Ivanov nor Pankrat had ever seen him in such a state before.

The Professor tore off his tie, ripped the buttons off his shirt, turned a strange paralysed purple and staggered out with vacant glassy eyes. His howls echoed beneath the Institute's stone vaulting.

"Anaconda! Anaconda!" they rang.

"Go and catch the Professor!" Ivanov cried to Pankrat who was hopping up and down with terror on the spot. "Get him some water. He's had a fit."

CHAPTER XI

Bloodshed and Death

A frenzied electrical night blazed in Moscow. All the lights were burning, and the flats were full of lamps with the shades taken off. No one was asleep in the whole of Moscow with its population of four million, except for small children. In their apartments people ate and drank whatever came to hand, and

the slightest cry brought fear-distorted faces to the windows on all floors to stare up at the night sky criss-crossed by searchlights. Now and then white lights flared up, casting pale melting cones over Moscow before they faded away. There was the constant low drone of aeroplanes. It was particularly frightening in Tverskaya-Yamskaya Street. Every ten minutes trains made up of goods vans, passenger carriages of different classes and even tank-trucks kept arriving at Alexandrovsky Station with fear-crazed folk clinging to them, and Tverskaya-Yamskaya was packed with people riding in buses and on the roofs of trams, crushing one another and getting run over. Now and then came the anxious crack of shots being fired above the crowd at the station. That was the military detachments stopping panic-stricken demented people who were running along the railway track from Smolensk Province to Moscow. Now and then the glass in the station windows would fly out with a light frenzied sob and the steam engines start wailing. The streets were strewn with posters, which had been dropped and trampled on, while the same posters stared out from the walls under the hot red reflectors. Everyone knew what they said, and no one read them any more. They announced that Moscow was now under martial law. Panicking was forbidden on threat of severe punishment, and Red Army detachments armed with poison gas were already on their way to Smolensk Province. But the posters could not stop the howling night. In their apartments people dropped and broke dishes and vases, ran about banging into things, tied and untied bundles and cases in the vain hope of somehow getting to Kalanchevskaya Square and Yaroslavl or Nikolayevsky Station. But, alas, all the stations to the north and east were surrounded by a dense cordon of infantry, and huge lorries, swaying and rattling their chains, piled high with boxes on top of which sat Red Army men in pointed helmets, bayonets at the ready, were evacuating gold bullion from the vaults of the People's Commissariat of Finances and large crates marked "Tretyakov Gallery. Handle with care!" Cars were roaring and racing all over Moscow.

Far away in the sky was the reflected glow of a fire, and the constant boom of cannons rocked the dense blackness of August.

Towards morning, a huge snake of cavalry, thousands strong, hooves clattering on the cobble-stones, wended its way up Tverskaya through sleepless Moscow, which had still not extinguished a single light. Everyone in its path huddled against entrances and shop-windows, knocking in panes of glass. The ends of crimson helmets dangled down grey backs, and pike tips pierced the sky. At the sight of these advancing columns cutting their way through the sea of madness, the frantic, wailing crowds of people seemed to come to their senses. There were hopeful shouts from the thronged pavements.

"Hooray! Long live the cavalry!" shouted some frenzied women's voices.

"Hooray!" echoed some men.

"We'll be crushed to death!" someone wailed.

"Help!" came shouts from the pavement.

Packets of cigarettes, silver coins and watches flew into the columns from the pavements. Some women jumped out into the roadway, at great risk, and ran alongside the cavalry, clutching the stirrups and kissing them. Above the constant clatter of hooves rose occasional shouts from the platoon commanders:

"Rein in."

There was some rowdy, lewd singing and the faces in cocked crimson helmets stared from their horses in the flickering neon lights of advertisements. Now and then, behind the columns of open-faced cavalry, came weird figures, also on horseback, wearing strange masks with pipes that ran over their shoulders and cylinders strapped to their backs. Behind them crawled huge tank-trucks with long hoses like those on fire-engines. Heavy tanks on caterpillar tracks, shut tight, with narrow shinning loopholes, rumbled along the roadway. The cavalry columns gave way to grey armoured cars with the same pipes sticking out and white skulls painted on the sides over the words "Volunteer-Chem. Poison gas".

"Let 'em have it, lads!" the crowds on the pavements shouted. "Kill the reptiles! Save Moscow!"

Cheerful curses rippled along the ranks. Packets of cigarettes whizzed through the lamp-lit night air, and white teeth grinned from the horses at the crazed people. A hoarse heart-rending song spread through the ranks:

...No ace, nor queen, nor jack have we,
But we'll kill the reptiles sure as can be.
And blast them into eternity...

Loud bursts of cheering surged over the motley throng as the rumour spread that out in front on horseback, wearing the same crimson helmet as all the other horsemen, was the now grey-haired and elderly cavalry commander who had become a legend ten years ago. The crowd howled, and their hoorays floated up into the sky, bringing a little comfort to their desperate hearts.

* * *

The Institute was dimly lit. The events reached it only as isolated, confused and vague echoes. At one point some shots rang out under the neon clock by the Manege. Some marauders who had tried to loot a flat in Volkhonka were being shot on the spot. There was little traffic in the street here. It was all concentrated round the railway stations. In the Professor's room, where a single lamp burned dimly casting a circle of light on the desk, Persikov sat silently, head in hands. Streak of smoke hung around him. The ray in the chamber had been switched off. The frogs in the terrariums were silent, for they were already asleep. The Professor was not working or reading. At his side, under his left elbow, lay the evening edition of telegrams in the narrow column, which announced that Smolensk was in flames and artillery were bombarding the Mozhaisk forest section by section, destroying deposits of crocodile eggs in all the damp ravines. It also reported that a squadron of aeroplanes had carried out a highly successful operation near Vyazma, spraying almost the whole district with poison gas, but there were countless human losses in the area because instead of leaving it in an orderly fashion, the population had panicked and made off in small groups to wherever the fancy took them. It also said that a certain Caucasian cavalry division on the way to Mozhaisk had won a brilliant victory against hordes of ostriches, killing the lot of them and destroying huge deposits of ostrich eggs. The division itself had suffered very few losses. There was a government announcement that if it should prove impossible to keep the

reptiles outside the 120-mile zone around Moscow, the capital would be completely evacuated. Office- and factory-workers should remain calm. The government would take the strictest measures to avoid a repetition of the Smolensk situation, as a result of which, due to the pandemonium caused by a sudden attack from rattlesnakes numbering several thousands, the town had been set on fire in several places when people had abandoned burning stoves and begun a hopeless mass exodus. It also announced that Moscow's food supplies would last for at least six months and that a committee under the Commander-in-Chief was taking urgent measures to armour apartments against attacks by reptiles in the streets of the capital, if the Red Army and aeroplanes did not succeed in halting their advance.

The Professor read none of this, but stared vacantly in front of him and smoked. Apart from him there were only two other people in the Institute, Pankrat and the house-keeper, Maria Stepanovna, who kept bursting into tears. This was her third sleepless night, which she was spending in the Professor's laboratory, because he flatly refused to leave his only remaining chamber, even though it had been switched off. Maria Stepanovna had taken refuge on the oilcloth-covered divan, in the shade in the corner, and maintained a grief-stricken silence, watching the kettle with the Professor's tea boil on the tripod of a Bunsen Burner. The Institute was quiet. It all happened very suddenly.

Some loud angry cries rang out in the street, making Maria Stepanovna jump up and scream. Lamps flashed outside, and Pankrat's voice was heard in the vestibule. The Professor misinterpreted this noise. He raised his head for a moment and muttered: "Listen to them raving ... what can I do now?" Then he went into a trance again. But he was soon brought out of it. There was a terrible pounding on the iron doors of the Institute in Herzen Street, and the walls trembled. Then a whole section of mirror cracked in the neighbouring room. A window pane in the Professor's laboratory was smashed as a grey cobble-stone flew through it, knocking over a glass table. The frogs woke up in the terrariums and began to croak. Maria Stepanovna rushed up to the Professor, clutched his arm and cried: "Run away, Vladimir Ipatych, run away!" The Professor got off the revolving chair, straightened up and

crooked his finger, his eyes flashing for a moment with a sharpness which recalled the earlier inspired Persikov.

"I'm not going anywhere," he said. "It's quite ridiculous. They're rushing around like madmen. And if the whole of Moscow has gone crazy, where could I go? And please stop shouting. What's it got to do with me? Pankrat!" he cried, pressing the button.

He probably wanted Pankrat to stop all the fuss, which he had never liked. But Pankrat was no longer in a state to do anything. The pounding had ended with the Institute doors flying open and the sound of distant gunfire. But then the whole stone building shook with a sudden stampede, shouts and breaking glass. Maria Stepanovna seized hold of Persikov's arms and tried to drag him away, but he shook her off, straightened himself up to his full height and went into the corridor, still wearing his white coat.

"Well?" he asked. The door burst open, and the first thing to appear on the threshold was the back of a soldier with a red long-service stripe and a star on his left sleeve. He was firing his revolver and retreating from the door, through which a furious crowd was surging. Then he turned and shouted at Persikov:

"Run for your life, Professor! I can't help you anymore."

His words were greeted by a scream from Maria Stepanovna. The soldier rushed past Persikov, who stood rooted to the spot like a white statue, and disappeared down the dark winding corridors at the other end. People rushed through the door, howling:

"Beat him! Kill him..."

"The villain!"

"You let the reptiles loose!"

The corridor was a swarming mass of contorted faces and torn clothes. A shot rang out. Sticks were brandished. Persikov stepped back and half-closed the door of his room, where Maria Stepanovna was kneeling on the floor in terror, then stretched out his arms like one crucified. He did not want to let the crowd in and shouted angrily:

"It's positive madness. You're like wild animals. What do you want?" Then he yelled: "Get out of here!" and finished with the curt, familiar command: "Get rid of them, Pankrat."

But Pankrat could not get rid of anyone now. He was lying motionless in the vestibule, torn and trampled, with a

smashed skull. More and more people swarmed past him, paying no attention to the police firing in the street.

A short man on crooked ape-like legs, in a tattered jacket and torn shirt-front all askew, leapt out of the crowd at Persikov and split the Professor's skull open with a terrible blow from his stick. Persikov staggered and collapsed slowly onto one side. His last words were:

"Pankrat. Pankrat."

The totally innocent Maria Stepanovna was killed and torn to pieces in the Professor's room. They also smashed the chamber with the extinguished ray and the terrariums, after killing and trampling on the crazed frogs, then the glass tables and the reflectors. An hour later the Institute was in flames. Around lay corpses cordoned off by a column of soldiers armed with electric revolvers, while fire-engines sucked up water and sprayed it on all the windows through which long roaring tongues of flame were leaping.

CHAPTER XII

A Frosty God *Ex Machina*

On the night of 19th August, 1928, there was an unheard-of frost the likes of which no elderly folk could recall within living memory. It lasted forty-eight hours and reached eighteen degrees below. Panic-stricken Moscow closed all its doors and windows. Only towards the end of the third day did the public realise that the frost had saved the capital and the endless expanses under its sway afflicted by the terrible disaster of 1928. The cavalry army by Mozhaisk, which had lost three-quarters of its men, was on its last legs, and the poison gas squads had been unable to halt the loathsome reptiles, who were advancing on Moscow in a semi-circle from the west, south-west and south.

They were killed off by the frost. The foul hordes could not survive two days of minus eighteen degrees centigrade, and come the last week of August, when the frost disappeared leaving only damp and wet behind it, moisture in the air and trees with leaves dead from the unexpected cold, there was nothing to fight. The catastrophe was over. The forests, fields and boundless marshes were still covered with coloured eggs, some bearing

the strange pattern unfamiliar in these parts, which Feight, who had disappeared no one knew where, had taken to be muck, but these eggs were now completely harmless. They were dead, the embryos inside them had been killed.

For a long time afterwards these vast expanses were heavy with the rotting corpses of crocodiles and snakes brought to life by the ray engendered in Herzen Street under a genius's eye, but they were no longer dangerous. These precarious creations of putrid tropical swamps perished in two days, leaving a terrible stench, putrefaction and decay over three provinces. There were epidemics and widespread diseases from the corpses of reptiles and people, and the army was kept busy for a long time, now supplied not with poison gas, but with engineering equipment, kerosene tanks and hoses to clean the ground. It completed this work by the spring of 1929.

And in the spring of 'twenty-nine Moscow began to dance, whirl and shimmer with lights again. Once more you could hear the old shuffling sound of the mechanical carriages, a crescent moon hung, as if by a thread, over the dome of Christ the Saviour, and on the site of the two-storey Institute which burnt down in August 'twenty-eight they built a new zoological palace, with Docent Ivanov in charge. But Persikov was no more. No more did people see the persuasive crooked finger thrust at them or hear the rasping croaking voice. The world went on talking and writing about the ray and the catastrophe of '28 for a long time afterwards, but then the name of Professor Vladimir Ipatievich Persikov was enveloped in mist and extinguished, like the red ray discovered by him on that fateful April night. No one succeeded in producing this ray again, although that refined gentleman, Pyotr Stepanovich Ivanov, now a professor, occasionally tried. The first chamber was destroyed by the frenzied crowd on the night of Persikov's murder. The other three chambers were burnt on the Red Ray State Farm in Nikolskoye during the first battle of the aeroplanes with the reptiles, and it did not prove possible to reconstruct them. Simple though the combination of the lenses with the mirror-reflected light may have been, it could not be reproduced a second time, in spite of Ivanov's efforts. Evidently, in addition to mere knowledge it required something special, something possessed by one man alone in the whole world, the late Professor Vladimir Ipatievich Persikov.

ANDREI PLATONOV



Andrei Platonov (1899-1951) acquired a literary reputation in the late twenties and thirties as a master of the psychological short story. His talent was noted early on by Maxim Gorky and Ernest Hemingway. Yet it is only today that Platonov, one of the most original writers of the twentieth century, is being widely read in his own country. His major works, the novels *Chevengur* and *The Foundation Pit* and the stories "The Juvenile Sea" and "Dzhan", not published during his lifetime, are now appearing in millions of copies in the Soviet Union. Platonov's original use of language, remarkable ability to portray the complex nuances of the human psyche, and compassion for his fellowmen make him a writer of exceptional stature.

ULIA

There was once a lovely child. Everyone has forgotten it now, and forgotten what it was called. No one remembers it, not its name or its face. Only my grandmother remembered that lovely child, and she told me about it, what it was like.

Grandmother said the child was called Ulia, and it was a girl. Everyone who saw little Ulia felt a guilty pain in their heart, because Ulia was gentle-faced and sweet-natured, but not everyone who looked at her was honest and good.

She had large clear eyes, and everyone saw that deep down in them, at the very bottom, was the most important, the dearest thing in the world, and they all wanted to gaze into Ulia's eyes and see for themselves the most important and happy thing deep down in them... But Ulia blinked so no one had

time to see properly what was deep down in her clear eyes. When folk looked into Ulia's eyes again and some began to understand what they saw there, Ulia blinked again, so you could never find out properly what was at the bottom of her eyes.

Yet one person did manage to look right to the bottom of Ulia's eyes and see what was there. That man was called Demian. He lived by buying grain cheaply from the peasants when there was a good harvest and selling it for lots of money when there was a shortage, so he himself was always rich and well-fed. Deep down in Ulia's eyes Demian saw himself, not the person he seemed to be to everyone, but the one he really was: with greedy jaws and savage eyes; Demian's hidden soul was written clearly on his face. And when he saw himself, Demian left the place where he lived, and no one heard anything of him for a long time, and they began to forget about him.

Ulia's eyes reflected the only real truth. If a cruel man had a handsome face and rich clothes, in Ulia's eyes he was ugly and covered with sores instead of finery.

Ulia herself did not know that her eyes reflected the truth. She was still too young and simple. And other folk did not have time to see themselves in her eyes, but they were all fond of Ulia and thought life must be good if she existed in the world.

Ulia did not know her real mother and father. She had been found one summer under a pine tree by a wayside well. She was only a few weeks old then: she lay on the ground, wrapped in a warm shawl, gazing silently at the sky with her big eyes which kept changing colour: they were grey, or pale blue, or quite dark.

Some good folk took the child in, then a childless peasant family called her their daughter and christened her Uliana. And Ulia spent all her early childhood in her foster-parents' small wooden house.

When she slept her eyes were only half-closed and she seemed to be looking with them. Towards morning, when it grew light outside, Ulia's half-open eyes reflected everything you could see through the window. She slept on a bench, and her face was lit by the early morning. Branches of willow growing by the window, clouds touched by the first gentle sun,

birds winging past—all this was outside and inside, shining deep down in Ulia's eyes; but in Ulia the clouds, birds and willow leaves were better, clearer and happier than they were when other people saw them.

Little Ulia's foster-parents loved her so much they used to miss her in their sleep and wake up each night. They would climb down from the stove-bed, tiptoe up to Ulia and stare for a long time in the dark at their sleeping foster-daughter, who was more precious to them than if she had been their own. They seemed to see light shining from her half-closed eyes, and then it was as good in the poor house as on a feast day in their youth.

"Ulia will die soon, like as not," said the mother quietly.

"Be quiet, don't ask for trouble," said the father. "Why should she die so little?"

"Children like her don't live long," the mother said again. "Her eyes don't close when she's asleep." In their village folk believed that children whose eyes did not close when they were asleep would die early.

How many times the mother wanted to pull the lids down over Ulia's eyes with her hand, but the father told her not to touch the child or she would frighten her. Even in the daytime, when Ulia was playing in the corner with scraps of cloth or pouring water from a clay bowl into a tin mug, the father would not touch his daughter, as if afraid of harming her small body.

Fair hair grew on Ulia's head and it curled into locks, as if the wind had blown into it and stayed there. But awake or asleep, Ulia's gentle face would peer somewhere anxiously. At such moments the father and mother felt that Ulia wanted to ask them about something troubling her, but could not because she didn't speak yet.

The father asked the village doctor to come and see Ulia. Perhaps something's paining her and the doctor will help her, he thought. The doctor listened to Ulia's breathing and said it would all get better when she got older.

"Why does everyone like her?" the father asked the doctor. "It would be better if she weren't so nice."

"It's a trick of nature," the doctor replied.

The father and mother took offence.

"What trick!" they said. "She's a live person, not a toy."

Other folk still tried to look into Ulia's eyes and see what they were truly like. Perhaps some of them really did see themselves, only didn't say so, just told everyone they hadn't been able to, because Ulia had blinked.

Everyone knew Ulia's eyes changed colour. When she looked at something good, the sky, a butterfly, a cow, a flower, or a poor old man passing by, her eyes shone with a transparent light, but when she looked at something with evil inside it, her eyes grew dark and opaque. Only deep down in Ulia's eyes, right in the middle, the same clear light always shone, reflecting the truth about the person or thing she was looking at—not what people see on the outside, but what is hidden secretly within and invisible.

When Ulia was two she began to talk, and she talked clearly, but little, and did not know many words... In the fields and village street she saw what other folk saw and understood. Yet Ulia was always surprised at what she saw, and sometimes cried out with fear and wept, pointing at what she had seen.

"What is it? What's the matter, lass?" her father would ask and pick her up in his arms, not knowing what had alarmed her. "Don't look at me like that. The cows over there are going home, and I'm here with you."

Ulia looked fearfully at her father, as if he were a stranger and she had never seen him before. She was so afraid that she got down and ran away from her father. And she was frightened of her mother too and used to hide from her.

Ulia was calm only in the darkness, when her eyes saw nothing.

As soon as she woke up of a morning Ulia wanted to run out of the house. And she would go off into a dark barn or a field where there was a sandy cave in a gully, and sit there in the dark until her father and mother found her. And when her father or mother picked her up in their arms, hugged her to them and kissed her eyes, Ulia wept with fear and trembled all over, as if she were caught by wolves and not held by loving parents.

If Ulia saw a timid butterfly fluttering over the grass, she would cry out and run away from it, and her terror-stricken heart beat hard for a long time afterwards. But most of all Ulia was afraid of an old woman, my grandmother, who was so old that even the other old women called her grandmother too.

Grandmother didn't often come to the house where Ulia lived. But when she came, she always brought the little girl a roll of white flour or a lump of sugar or a pair of mittens which had taken her forty days to knit, or something else that Ulia needed. Grandmother said she ought to have died already, it was high time after all, but she couldn't die now. Whenever she thought of Ulia her weak old heart began to breathe and beat again like a young one: it breathed for love of Ulia, pity for her and joy.

As soon as Ulia saw Grandmother she started to cry; she trembled with fear and never took her darkened eyes off Grandmother.

"She can't see the truth!" Grandmother would say. "She sees evil as good and good as evil."

"Then why can we see the whole real truth in her eyes?" her father would ask.

"For that very reason!" Grandmother would say again. "The whole truth shines in her, but she doesn't understand the light, and everything looks the opposite to her. Life's harder for her than for a blind person. It would be better if she was blind."

"Perhaps she's right," the father thought then. "Ulia sees bad as good and good as bad."

Ulia didn't like flowers. She never touched them. But she would fill her skirt with black rubbish from the ground, go off to a dark corner and play there alone, closing her eyes and sorting out the rubbish with her hands. She did not make friends with the other children who lived in the village and used to run away home from them.

"I'm afraid!" Ulia would cry. "They scare me."

Then her mother would press Ulia's head to her breast, as if to hide and calm the child in her heart.

The children in the village were good and unspoilt with pure faces. They liked Ulia and used to smile at her.

Her mother couldn't understand what Ulia was afraid of and what terrible things her poor lovely eyes could see.

"Don't be frightened, love," her mother would say. "You mustn't be afraid, because I'm with you."

Ulia looked at her mother and cried again:

"I'm afraid!"

"How can you be afraid? It's me!"

"I'm afraid of you: you scare me!" Ulia would say and close her eyes so as not to see her mother.

No one knew what Ulia saw, and she was too afraid to tell them.

There was another little girl in the village; she was four years old and her name was Grusha. Ulia began playing with her alone and grew fond of her. Grusha had a long face, so she was nicknamed "horse-head", she was bad-tempered; she didn't even love her father and mother and said she would run far away from home soon and never come back, because it was bad here and good there.

Ulia touched Grusha's face with her hands and told her she was beautiful. Ulia's eyes looked affectionately at Grusha's angry, miserable face, as if she saw before her a kind loving friend with a pretty face. Once Grusha happened to look into Ulia's eyes and saw herself as she really was. She cried out in fright and ran off home. After that Grusha became more kind-hearted and stopped telling her parents it was bad at home. Whenever she wanted to be mean again, she remembered that terrible image of herself in Ulia's eyes, felt afraid of herself and grew calm and gentle.

Although it was sad for Ulia to see flowers and people's kind faces as something terrible, like all little children she ate bread, drank milk and grew. Life passes quickly, and soon Ulia was five, then six, then seven.

About that time the man called Demian who had gone away long ago returned to their village. He came back poor and simple, started tilling the soil like everyone else, and lived as a good man to a ripe old age. He even wanted to take Ulia as his adopted daughter, for he was old and lonely, but Ulia's foster-parents could not give their consent. They could not live without Ulia themselves, ever since they had taken her in.

When she was five Ulia stopped crying and running away in fear; she only grew sad when she saw a good, fine soul before her, like my old grandmother or other gentle folk, and she often wept. The true image of the person she was looking at still shone deep down in her big eyes. But she herself saw no truth, only falsehood. And as her trusting, sad eyes surveyed the world, not understanding what they saw, they seemed to stare in amazement.

When Ulia was seven, her foster-parents told her who they

were to her and that no one knew where Ulia's real father and mother lived or whether they were still alive. Her foster-parents were right to tell her this. They wanted the girl to hear the truth from them, not from other folk. Other folk would tell her about it some time, but they would tell her spitefully and hurt her child's heart.

"Are they frightening too?" asked Ulia about her real parents.

"No, they're not," said her foster-father. "They brought you into the world. There's no one dearer to you than them."

"You can't see the truth, daughter," sighed her foster-mother. "Your eyes are bewitched."

After that Ulia was sadder than ever. It was summer, and Ulia resolved that come autumn she would leave home to find her real father and mother who had abandoned her.

And before the summer was over an elderly peasant woman in bast shoes with a bundle on her back came to the village. She had walked a long way and was very tired. She sat down by the wayside well with the old pine tree next to it, looked at the tree, then got up and felt the earth round it as if searching for something left there long ago and forgotten. Then she retied her footcloths, went to the house where Demian lived and sat down on the bench outside.

There were no passers-by. Everyone was working in the fields. And the woman sat alone for a long time. Then a little girl came out of one of the houses. She saw the stranger and went up to her.

"I'm not afraid of you," said the girl who had big eyes shining with a clear light.

The stranger looked at the girl, took her by the hand, then put her arms round her and hugged her close. The girl did not take fright or cry out. Then the woman kissed the child on one eye and the other, and burst into tears herself: she could tell that Ulia was her daughter—from her eyes, the birthmark on her neck, her whole body and her own trembling heart.

"I was young and foolish," said the woman. "I left you by the well. Now I've come back for you."

Ulia nestled up to the woman's soft warm bosom and dozed off.

"I'm your mother," said the woman and kissed Ulia's half-closed eyes again.

Her mother's kiss cured Ulia's eyes, and after that she began to see the sunlit world as others saw it. She looked meekly before her with her clear grey eyes and feared no one. She could see properly—the goodness and beauty in the world no longer looked frightening and ugly, or the evil and cruel beautiful, as they had without her real mother.

Yet after that folk could see nothing deep down in Ulia's eyes: the secret image of truth in them had disappeared. Ulia was not sorry that the truth no longer shone in her eyes, nor was her real mother when she learned about it.

"Folk don't need to see the truth," said her mother. "They know it themselves, and those that don't will ne'er believe it if they do see it..."

About that time my old grandmother died and could tell me no more of Ulia. But many years later I saw Ulia myself one day. She had become a beautiful girl, so beautiful that she was better than other folk needed: so they admired her, but their heart remained indifferent to her.

VSEVOLOD IVANOV



Vsevolod Ivanov (1895-1963) was born into the family of a village teacher. He studied at the Pavlodar agricultural school and afterwards tried a multitude of jobs: he was a shop assistant, a sailor, a printshop worker, a stevedore, a circus performer.

His stories first appeared in newspapers in 1915. In 1921 he moved to Moscow. Maxim Gorky took a warm interest in Vsevolod Ivanov and hastened the publication of his short novels *The Partisans* (1921) and *Armoured Train 14-69* (1922), which brought Ivanov instant literary fame.

Vsevolod Ivanov struck a new vein of historical realism in his prose. The short stories of those years may have been written in a somewhat flowery style and are overloaded with metaphors. But this enabled him to disclose the unexpected and "fantastic" sides of the revolution.

SISYPHUS, SON OF AEOLUS

The soldier knew them at once, his native mountains!

The mountains had always been like this at noon, a sombre jagged grey slashed with deep orange gorges. And he at once recognised the Scironian Road, winding down the southern flank of the mountains. It lay in coils, like a herdsman's whip. So had Poliander seen it as a boy, and so it had remained to this day. It was a road of evil repute, for the traveller might suddenly observe blood oozing forth from its surface, or other signs of misfortune.

But what were misfortunes to Poliander? He had drawn his full ration of them and drunk the cup to the dregs. And now he was withered and yellow before his time, as if from some pernicious sickness.

He had sworn to serve Alexander, King of Macedonia, called the Great, and he had served him. Later he had served King Cassander, whose character had combined a ruthless irascibility with an even more ruthless ambition. It was King Cassander who had incarcerated the widow and son of the Great Alexander, to whom the gods of every land and the armies of every land had paid homage. But soldier Poliander continued to carry his silver-chased shield against the enemies of Cassander. Foolish man that he was, he wanted Cassander to think well of him! It is said that faith can move mountains. But King Cassander proved more immovable than the biggest mountain. Cassander distrusted Poliander, as he distrusted all soldiers; he feared his shield, his thick red neck and his stentorian voice, whose thunder other soldiers loved to hear. Before he was forty King Cassander had declared him a sick peltast, too weak to serve in the light infantry, and sent him home without even a bounty.

And now before him rose the mountains beyond which lay his homeland—the rich city of Corinth. The soldier looked at the mountains and wondered how he would be greeted in his native city and who among his kinsmen would be still alive. It was many years since he had last set foot on his native soil. In those days he had been strong, but now his wounds had been declared dangerous and he had been released from King Cassander's army. A weakling!

"Who do my wounds endanger, by the dog and the goose? Maybe they endanger you, o King? Perhaps you fear my strong belief that the son of the Great One, the small and youthful Alexander Aegus, will be just as warlike as his father when he grows up? He will need me! He will need to campaign! But you, o King, have wit enough only to hold what was won by the Great Alexander. And will you hold even that, King Cassander?"

Such were the words he muttered as he gazed with apprehension at the Scironian Road. Indeed he was loath to climb it. He had known enough misfortunes as a soldier! Enough bad omens! He wanted to live the tranquil life of an honourable man, a dyer of good woolen cloth, for example.

And he remembered a path that had once been a short cut to Corinth. True, it was a difficult path, but it was not visited by bad omens.

"Hi, there!"

The peasants of a nearby village reaping their fields turned to look at him with respect. For relief from the heat he had discarded his armour, but his chest was so broad that he seemed to be still wearing it. He always kept his elbows stuck out, both from the habit of holding shield and spear and because his armour never allowed them to lie close to his sides. He even slept on his back, his big sensuous mouth wide open. His eyes, like those of all men who have travelled much, expressed constant wonder, and their colour was that of mown grass which is just about to turn into hay but despite its dryish maturity still retains the hue and aroma of youth.

He stood in the picturesque and majestic pose befitting a soldier of Alexander the Great, who had marched from the borders of Thrace to the icy Nestos, where eternal winter reigns; who had seen the Caucasian Mountains, the farthest limit of the world, beyond which lies the Kingdom of Darkness; who had seen Memphis, Damascus and Susa, and all the rocky citadels of Iran, the banks of the Hydaspes and the marshlands of the Indus, where he had faced the charging elephants of King Porus of India with their narrow eyes and strong yellow tusks.

He wished the peasants good luck with their harvest, adding that Zeus and Athena would help them, and then asked for a drink of water. A girl of about fourteen with lively eyes and thick, crudely cut brown hair brought him a pitcher of tepid water. The scent of grain was wafted from the threshing floor. A mule stood snuffling and scratching its flank. An older woman with steep, well-fed thighs betokening the proximity of rich Corinth, a city skilled in the arts of buying and selling, bent down and again began deftly cutting the thick, shining ears of wheat and putting them in her basket. The girl arranged them with their cut stalks to the south, on the hardened, black-violet earth of the threshing floor, where a light dust rose as the pack mules and oxen-drawn threshing carts with their heavy solid wheels came up to it.

Returning the pitcher, Poliander said, "By the dog and the goose I swear that the girls of Corinth are as hospitable and beautiful as ever! And that the craftsmen are still putting them on their vases and bronze and those columns they adorn with acanthus leaves."

The villagers smiled at his wise words and the girl who had brought him water stuck her finger in her mouth in wonder.

"I am hurrying to Corinth," he said. "I am tired of glory and wish to live a peaceful life. I have with me the true red juice from a purple shell-fish that, I swear by the dog and the goose, I actually saw being caught. I have learned to dye cloth purple from the Phoenicians and have practised under the finest craftsmen of Tyre, Kosa and Tizent."

And he held out his sinewy fingers, the long hairs of which were dyed a blood red. The villagers started back in fright and an old man with a thick, bulging nose said to him, "Did you ask about the Scironian Road? It lies before you."

Then soldier Poliander asked, "Is the Scironian Road safe?"

"It is safer than any other."

"In my time," the soldier said quietly, "the travellers who were strong and in a hurry used to shorten the distance. They would take the path known as the Almian. No oxen or mules could climb it, but my feet remember that path well."

The peasants exchanged glances and the soldier read consternation on their faces.

"Has a cliff fallen on the path?" he asked. "Has some new precipice appeared? Or have the gods released a waterfall?"

The old man with the thick, bulging nose said, "It is an evil place."

"Robbers?" the soldier asked laughing, and showed the peasants his short javelin and his sword, which was straight and fine, its hilt studded with silver and ivory. "Ha-ha! Are there many of them? Ha-ha!"

The old man, scratching between his shoulder-blades with a crooked stick, repeated reluctantly, "It is an evil place. Take the Scironian Road. It will be better. No one has trodden the Almian path for years."

"Where do you see more omens?" the soldier asked resolutely.

"On the Scironian."

"Then who have I to fear?"

"The son of Aeolus," the old man replied, looking round fearfully.

The soldier roared with laughter.

"The son of Aeolus? The son of the god of the winds? What is he then? A breeze?"

"You will see," the old man replied, drawing back. The other peasants had already retreated, reluctant to discuss so dangerous a subject.

Soldier Poliander gave a deliberately loud laugh and picked up his helmet with its tattered horse-hair plume and roughly fashioned back and breast plates, joined by battered metal shoulder-pieces. Sadly he noted that the felt lining of his cuirass was moth-eaten. "And I was hoping to make a good sale of my armour in Corinth. I shall have to buy a piece of Greek felt to mend it... That won't be difficult, but Greek felt is of no value and my fine Persian stuff is ruined! Could this moth be a bad omen?"

Grumbling to himself, he heaved his sun-warmed accoutrements on to his shoulder and took the Almian path, swinging along with broad strides as if to hasten the approach of danger.

He clumped along on his cork-lined leather soles. The clank of his skilfully tied equipment rang out far and wide reminding him of his campaigns and of his comrades whom time had swallowed as the bottomless depth swallows those who sail the seas.

Beyond the village he spotted a dried-up watercourse, concealed by bushes. A few goats were reaching up on their hind legs to nibble the leaves. The stream-bed was scattered with greyish-blue pebbles and from it there rose a menacing lifelessness in the form of barely visible wisps of vapour. Sand sprinkled down from the high banks with a sound like someone scraping soft wood with a knife. The soldier felt ill at ease. He stopped and stood staring at the goats until he began to feel hungry himself.

Then he took a flat loaf out of his bag and, nibbling it like the goats in order to prolong the pleasure and give himself time to consider the situation, he turned his gaze to the bare glittering crags which he was to climb. Maybe I ought to have taken the Scironian Road after all, he thought. But that will mean turning back. How can a soldier who has just boasted of scaling the rocky citadels of Iran turn back? It would be a disgrace for a soldier of the Great One!

And he recalled the Almian path that he had first climbed thirty years ago or more. He had been perched on his uncle's

shoulders. His uncle was young and strong and his long thick hair smelled of oil; his jerkin was damp, and now and then the little boy would timidly touch the sloping shoulder. Then the uncle would look up with mock severity and push into the boy's hand a lump of flat bread that smelled of smoke and olive oil. No one had a bad word to say about the Almian path in those days, or about the ruthless son of Aeolus.

Why ruthless? Why should I think that? Who set that word upon him, a word of dire punishment and pain, enforcing obedience like a metal choke collar for a dog? Who, by the dog and the goose?

He stopped, put his accoutrements down on a stone and looked back impatiently.

He had already made a fair distance up the path. He recognised it, although it had become overgrown and only close scrutiny revealed any traces.

The village below had merged with its olive-trees and vineyards. The valley had acquired the colour of wild, unfashioned rock. At last his overpowering desire to get as high as possible was satisfied. He was alone among the eternal, undying, indestructible rocks. And all around there reigned an eternal, everlasting stillness.

But not within him! He was assailed by a speedily growing premonition of evil, an evil that was as inescapable as it was unbearable.

Like a horse stamping its hooves in impatience, the soldier stamped his foot several times. In doing so he shifted the stone on which his weapons lay. The sword fell with a clatter. He tied it to his belt, put away the rest of his weapons in his bag and made the bag fast on his back.

Now it was easier to proceed. He strode on, thinking that impatience, as the wise men rightly say, is much akin to recklessness. He should have gone by the Scironian Road! He could have joined some passing caravan and talked to the merchants about the methods he had used to dye the fine, flowing garments of the oriental rulers. The merchants would have stared at him in wonder and been glad to have such a valiant defender and fellow traveller, and in the evening they would have treated him to a big, well-fattened haunch of mutton. And, sitting by their fire in the darkness, he would have felt as much at ease as in a city square in the daytime.

Here, even in the daytime he felt alarmed, as though he were enclosed by the arc of night. Even the thought of his dyes gave him no comfort. "What kind of purple dyer are you?" he mused. On his way to Corinth he had grudgingly used a punch of the precious purple, three packets of which he had bought with the last money he possessed. He had dissolved this pinch of powder and dyed a little fragment of cloth torn from the rectangular shoulder-piece that he wore on his left shoulder. The hair on his hands had turned a blood-red colour, but the cloth unexpectedly faded to a pumice grey. Had the craftsmen of Tyre given him the wrong formula? Had he paid his drachmas for nothing?

In his mind's eye he saw the cellar with the purple soaking in its broad low vats, and the cheerful dyers with their sleek faces and pleasure-loving eyes. Near the door two slaves, swaying rhythmically from side to side, were kneading the fuller's earth with their feet and the mud squeaked and squelched between their toes... Yes, the dyers of Tyre had cheated him! There was deceit in that cellar, just as there had been deceit at the court of King Cassander, and everywhere else!

And here he was on his way to Corinth, a deceitful and unmerciful city of traders and seafarers, which was now so near, and yet so far! What awaited him in Corinth?

To keep his hopes alive and help himself overcome these strange apprehensions he quickened his pace. The arduous path, he felt, would bring oblivion in the end, and it was with joy that he surveyed a great rock shaped like a riven tree towering above him on a grey crag with a violet foot. He quickly skirted it.

Before him there lay a hollow wooded with oak-trees. Further down, where the oaks ended there was a scree, and below that green waters roared among the rocks, throwing up splashes of white foam. The ash of the burning sun lay upon the oaks, the scree, and the rocks amid the green waters.

The path had disappeared altogether, swallowed up by the oaks.

The soldier entered their shade. They stood close to one another and their shade was dense, but still he felt ill at ease, as though he were at the bottom of a narrow and swampy ravine. From below came the ruthless hollow roar of the river. Above him the whole sky was blotted out by the motionless

oak crowns and their lower trunks bristled with short, dry branches that caught at his cloak, sword, bag and flask.

Muttering hasty prayers to the gods, the soldier ran out of the oak grove and, hunching his shoulders because the bag was slipping off them and he had neither the time nor the desire to right it, he ran out on to the scree, beyond which he could see another crag.

He was no longer peering down in search of the path.

He jumped from rock to rock, slipping and falling. Stones came loose and hurtled down. He stuck a foot in the hole from which a stone had rolled, but the hole shifted and he leapt desperately away from it. His hands were scratched, his feet gashed. His soles, the soles that had marched to the Euphrates and beyond, that had stood up to the journey from the Euxine Sea to the extreme borders of Thebes, came loose and he soon lost one altogether.

Sour, stinging sweat blurred his vision. Deprived of his usual powers of observation, he could see no further that ten javelin lengths ahead. He was able to move only thanks to habitual gift of a soldier whom the Great One had trained always to push ahead whatever the circumstances and whatever his strength, for virtue was the great and all-uniting aim of human existence and the will of the gods.

The sun, having enjoyed to the full the humility of the rocks, the screes and the oak-trees, and also the soldier's outstanding virtue and persistence, withdrew its grey and pitiless heat, which erodes strength as water erodes a wall, and sent down some soft, damp violet shadows. The soldier drank a gulp of water and, taking fresh heart, exclaimed, "By the dog and the goose I swear I'll find that vanished path!"

And at that moment he heard from behind the crag which he was just about to negotiate a sound that seemed very unusual for these mountainous parts. It was the whirr and swish of a discus being thrown. The soldier knew this sound well. He had been trained to throw the discus not only for sport, but also to give him greater confidence when hurling stones at the enemy.

He leaned against the rock and listened.

The sound grew, spread and suddenly, as though having broken through some barrier, disappeared.

A tantalising silence reigned over the crags. Now there was

yet another mystery to be solved in this acidly corrosive stillness... The soldier felt like halloing, giving a great, brassy shout with a lot of other soldiers, just as they would have shouted for rhythm's sake when hauling a siege engine or charging in battle.

Plucking up his courage, he made his way round the crag and saw another scree, like so many others that he had crossed. At that moment a wind sprang up. He recalled the old man's words about the son of Aeolus and shuddered. The thought thundered in his ears like a huge trumpet. He sat down on the stones and gasped huskily for breath.

Then he skirted yet another crag and crossed yet another scree. He now approached the crags where the scree ended with apprehension, gripping his sword and evoking the gods, including Aeolus. He would peer round the crags cautiously, and once even sharpened his sword on a stone before doing so.

All at once the sound came again. But now it did not resemble the sound of a metal discus. It was more like the roar of sea waves as, having rested in the deep, they roll forward playing with the pebbles on the shore. The sound came from somewhere above, although the sky was still cloudless. It grew with such speed and strength that the soldier jumped back from the crag. The sound passed over the crag and a few stones flew from the summit, just as the handle flies from the blade of a knife drawn in fury.

Soldier Poliander was afraid. But he was a soldier and he felt better when he had decided to confront the enemy. Staggering with fear, scarcely able to move his failing legs, he made his way round the crag.

There was no scree beyond it. It opened into a fair-sized valley, into which a merry little stream hurried, retreating from the mountains. Oaks and fruit-trees grew along its banks. Further on the stream dived sharply into a river, the sound of which could be heard faintly in the valley.

Alongside the stream, in the shade of the oak-trees, which here formed an avenue, Poliander beheld a road of a very strange shape that he had never seen before. This road, cut in the rock, which was the colour of wet cork, had but one lane and looked more like a groove or an endlessly long gallery. It began somewhere high up the mountain and ended far below,

on the edge of the valley, in a small bog that appeared to have been trampled by the hooves of an enormous horse.

Along this gallery, appearing and disappearing among the oaks, whose shadows fell upon his broad, muscular back, a hairy, huge-shouldered giant girded with skins was rolling a black ball of stone, the height of three men, polished to the brightness of a seashore pebble. The giant breathed in long, heavy gasps. His belly, which bulged like a wine barrel, rose and fell against the stone. His toes dug into the stream-bed and Poliander observed in astonishment that they had made steps for themselves.

"By the dog and the goose!" he exclaimed to himself, marvelling at the giant. "Who can this mighty fellow be who rolls a stone with the force of a storm at sea?"

Meanwhile the giant having heard Poliander's approach, turned his huge head with its red moustache and beard and said with an effort, "Thank the gods, a traveller! I'm ver-r-ry glad! Pass into the hut. I'm ver-r-ry glad! Start a fire. Put on the beans. And mix the wine. Ver-r-ry glad!" he uttered the word "ver-r-ry" with an effort every time he placed his foot in the hole delved by his toes, and rolled the stone forward.

"Who are you, o miracle?" Poliander asked.

"I'll be back in a minute!" the giant replied, and, pushing on, bellowed over his shoulder, "I'm ver-r-ry glad! There's a well behind the hut. Go down into it, and to one side there's a pit. Ver-r-ry glad! There's some snow in that pit. Mix it into the wine. Oh, I'm ver-r-ry glad!"

And he looked round again at Poliander. Now the soldier was able to examine his face. It was wrinkled and old but full of that victorious plenitude of days that is seldom seen but indicates, above all, uncommon strength and a skilled and patient expenditure of that strength.

Poliander backed away to the hut. The giant went on rolling the stone and the stone spun fast as if on a spindle, rolling quickly uphill, growing ever smaller in size and greater in brilliance until it seemed that the giant was propelling a glowing orange-yellow ingot into the intensively blue sky.

Poliander entered the hut, fanned the oak embers under a large cauldron into fire, found the well at the back of the hut, and went down the cold wet steps into it.

Before he reached the water he espied two niches. In the

first stood earthen pitchers of wine, while the second was packed to the brink with snow. Poliander nudged the nearest pitcher with his shoulder. It lurched heavily to one side and gave off a smell of wine.

"By the dog and the goose I swear I shall be in no hurry to part with this fellow!" Poliander exclaimed, thinking of the good-natured giant.

With some difficulty he carried the smallest pitcher of wine into the hut, and then attended to the snow where he found, wrapped in healing herbs, the flesh of a wild goat. He put this meat in with the beans and, when mixing the wine with water and snow, added a few spices from the precious handful that he had brought with him from the East.

Scarcely had he mixed the wine when there came again that terrible sound of simultaneous whistling and whirring, like a metal discus being thrown by a giant. Poliander skipped out of the hut. The threshold was dappled with the quivering shadows of the oak boughs. Far below the ball of stone was hurtling away down its gallery and a light, rainbow-hued dust rose over this gallery along the stream. The stone ball rolled to its appointed spot and stuck in the bog, throwing grass-green mud on all sides.

The giant, looking up at the sun from under his big hand, came lumbering down the mountain. As he approached the hut he wiped his hands on the goatskins girding his loins and smiled awkwardly.

"Are you glad, traveller?" he asked in a husky bass. "I'm ver-r-ry glad! Ver-r-ry glad indeed. Where are you from? Where're you going?"

The hut suddenly felt cramped, and so did Poliander's heart. He replied in a stifled voice, "By the dog and the goose, is this not the path to Corinth?"

"To Corinth?.." his host asked with an effort. "Ver-r-ry glad! To Corinth."

The giant brought water for his guest to wash with. He watched the soldier washing his feet and hands, and the giant's face, big and square as a table, furrowed with the deep wrinkles of peasant anxieties and labours, was filled with thought. He seemed to be wondering what Corinth was. And it struck the soldier that it might not be so easy to win good-natured understanding from this giant.

"To Corinth! I'm making for Corinth, my home town!" he ejaculated loudly, as though speaking to one who was deaf.

"To Corinth? Ver-r-ry glad! Sit down. Have something to eat."

They ate the beans in silence. Then the host with hands that were evidently impervious to heat picked the wild goat's meat out of the cauldron and placed it on a board. He sprinkled the meat liberally with salt and pointed to the wine.

"Salt? Ver-r-ry glad!.. We'll drink a lot." And he roared with laughter, holding his belly with both hands. Apparently he had difficulty in finding words and those that he did find gave him great pleasure. They went to his head like strong wine.

Both men cleaned their hands with rolled bits of bread and the host took the pitcher containing wine and snow. The aroma of spices delighted him and this, too, indicated that he had not seen a human being for a long time. The soldier ate the meat greedily, crunching the bones with his big strong teeth, and pride that he, Poliander, should have been the first to break the giant's long solitude gave his heart renewed strength.

"And I'm glad," he exclaimed. "By the dog and the goose, I swear it! Let's enjoy ourselves!"

And he raised the wooden cup of wine. He had tasted the wines of Lesbos, and Naxos, and the splendid wine of Chios. He was no novice when it came to wine. But this was the best of all. And he expressed his pleasure in grand style.

"Ver-r-ry glad!" the giant boomed. "Ver-r-ry glad. Drink some more. Ver-r-ry glad!"

And he poured more wine from the pitcher.

He himself drank but little. It was pleasure enough for him to see a fellow creature. But the soldier wanted to tell the tale of all that he had gained in life and afterwards squandered.

"Is it long since a traveller passed by here?" he asked.

"Yes, a long time," replied the giant with a broad smile. "Ver-r-ry glad."

"Are you here long?"

"Yes, a long time," his host replied. "Today's the last day!"

"The last day?" the soldier repeated. "Have you sold your hut, with its orchard and cornfield? Where is your buyer? Did you sell it for a good price?"

"Zeus be praised, he has released me," the giant said, and his deep-blue eyes that were the colour of the heavens shone with joy. "I'm very glad! This is the last day."

"Glory to Zeus," the soldier said in the customary tone. "But surely it wasn't Zeus who bought your hut, its orchard and cornfield?"

With much gesticulation to make the soldier understand his host said distinctly, "Zeus put me here and Zeus has freed me."

"But what about the priests?" the soldier rejoined, sipping his wine. "They want to build a temple here, do they? It's a beautiful spot."

"Not the priests—Zeus!" his host repeated insistently. "It was Zeus who put me here! Zeus himself!"

"Zeus? Then who might you be for Zeus himself to put you here?" the soldier asked rather scornfully.

"I am Sisyphus, the son of Aeolus."

The soldier blinked and the wine flowed over his cold knees.

"By the dog and the goose!" the soldier stammered. "You—Sisyphus!"

The host nodded his shaggy head, sipping wine from his cup, and the soldier asked, "I have heard of Sisyphus, son of Aeolus, god of the winds. I know that he once ruled Corinth, and it was long ago, long before the time of Homer."

"That was I," his host replied with such majestic simplicity that the soldier let his cup fall from his hand and the thick oaken beams supporting the roof of the hut swam before his eyes.

"You, by the dog and the goose!"

"I, Sisyphus," his host replied, and again sipped from his cup. "Drink!"

The soldier could drink no more and his host was obliged to offer an explanation, difficult though it was for him to do so.

"I had sinned much. I had murdered the innocent. I had robbed. And Zeus punished me. I must forever roll a stone up the mountain. When it reaches the summit some unknown force throws it down again. You have seen it. But today you have seen the last day. I have been obedient. Zeus appeared unto me yesterday and said: 'This is the last day.' And I'm ver-r-ry glad!"

The giant laughed.

A sudden thought made the soldier shudder and he asked, "Tell me, o esteemed Sisyphus, son of Aeolus. You must have been punished when you reached the kingdom of the dead, the kingdom of Hades. Is that where I am?"

Sisyphus answered, "For countless days I rolled the stone up a mountain in the underground kingdom of Hades. I repeat that I was obedient and did not anger the gods with grumbling. Zeus's pardon lies in my having worked my way without noticing it from the subterranean regions to this land of sunlight. That is why I am glad to see you, o traveller!"

The soldier asked, "Tell me, o Sisyphus, son of Aeolus, what is the subterranean kingdom of Hades like? You have the gift of expressing your thoughts with such power and brevity."

Sisyphus answered, "Slush. Rain. Damp. Always."

"By the dog and the goose," the soldier exclaimed, "there could be no stronger expression of gratitude to the gods for sun and wine!"

"Drink," said Sisyphus, laughing. "I'm ver-r-ry glad!"

"Praise be to the wise Zeus," the soldier declared, his cup full of the misty red wine. "And have you been here long, all alone, at the summit of the mountains?"

His host replied, "Yes, for long. I rolled the stone from dawn till dusk. I was obedient."

"And after sunset you tilled your land, trapped animals and gathered fruit." His host nodded and the soldier went on enumerating the hardships of his life. "It was hard in the heat. And even harder in the rain, when winter was approaching. The water must have been a hindrance..."

"Floods of it!" his host cried. "A river flowed against me! Up to my chest! The stone was submerged in the water. My hands slipped. Everything was wet. I had to fight against the current... But I am obedient to the gods. And Zeus has pardoned me."

"Praise be to the wise Zeus," the soldier said. "I beg you, pour me some more wine. This is wonderful wine. The last time I drank anything like it was in Iran."

"Were you a prisoner?"

"I a prisoner? Of the vile and cowardly Persians?" the soldier exclaimed with scorn. "Do you not know that Alexander the Great marched through Persia from beginning to end?"

"I know nothing," Sisyphus replied. "I was rolling the stone. Who is Alexander?"

"Ye gods!" Poliander exclaimed. "He does not know who Alexander is, the King of Macedonia! You know nothing of the battles he won, of how he conquered King Darius and ravaged the Indian kingdom of Porus, or how he wedded the beautiful princess Roxana, or of the numerous other treasures he gained?"

"I know nothing," Sisyphus replied. "The stone was heavy and it was difficult for me to look round."

"By the dog and the goose," the soldier cried, "I will tell you the whole story from beginning to end! Pour me more wine."

His host filled the cup again and the soldier began his tale.

Night had fallen. The stars were peeping through the branches of the oak-trees. The branches were still, as were the mountains beyond them, and the murmur of the stream was barely audible in the hut. Sisyphus sat with his great arms locked round his knees and the bronze-red light of the fire shone upon his face, making his eyes even bluer than before.

The soldier described the cities of the East. These cities were built of sun-baked bricks bonded with black and sticky tar that was the original and natural product of the Babylonian soil. He spoke of the oases with their tall palm-trees which lavish as many benefits from their trunks, branches, leaves, juice and fruit as there are days in the year. He spoke of the rafts floating on inflated skins that ply the full-flowing rivers with their high dams and carry all the wonderful gifts of the earth—horses, spices and women. Such were Persia, Egypt and India...

"And what has happened to them?" his host inquired.

The soldier rose and lifted his cup of wine.

"Praise be to the gods!" he exclaimed. "We crossed the Hellespont and made a sacrifice to our ancestor Achilles on the ruins of Ilium, of which you have surely heard. Then we marched to the River Granicus, where we defeated the Persians. Then we marched through their country, burning the cities, destroying the dams and cutting down the oases. The roads along which we passed were paved with whole

groves of palm-trees. We destroyed and burned everything! And then we reached the torrid zone where no man can set foot."

And inflamed with his story and the wine, Poliander went on wildly, "In this empty space we met only satyrs with purple horns and golden cloven hoofs. Their heads are shaggy, their noses flattened and there are wens in their cheeks, for they devote themselves to nothing but love, music and wine. We used to kill them. And we also killed the sirens. These passionate creatures with their alluring glances sit in flowery meadows and around them lie the bones of men who have died for love of them. We killed the centaurs and the pygmies, Indian and Ethiopian. With my sword alone—you see it here, Sisyphus—I destroyed a whole phalanx of pygmies, their cavalry. Every spring they ride out on goats and sheep in battle order to look for cranes' eggs... Ha-ha-ha!"

"Ver-r-ry glad!" his host cried, raising his cup. And his heavy voice was echoed with a roar by the brooding, invisible mountains.

The soldier continued.

"We ravaged and burned all this in the name of Achilles and to the glory of his descendant Alexander, King of Macedonia! And this made Corinth rich! It also made King Cassander rich, Cassander who has acted so ignobly towards me..."

The soldier lurched forward with anger, drunkenness and the thought that had just struck him. For a moment he stared at the giant sitting motionless by the fire, then he said, "Sisyphus, son of Aeolus! Are you the King of Corinth?"

"I was the King of Corinth," Sisyphus answered.

"And you shall be King of Corinth again!" the soldier cried. "You shall be King of all Greece. You will destroy the greedy, ignoble King Cassander with his everlasting lust for gain. And you will be king in his stead!"

The soldier had meant to say that it would be the under-age son of Alexander who would reign. But how could he say it? Sisyphus eyes were gleaming, he would clearly like the crown himself, and who could tell whether he would take the little Alexander Aegus on his shoulders.

To bend Sisyphus finally to his will, the soldier cried, "You will don the purple and become king! Do you know... Do

you know, o Sisyphus, that I have been sent to you by the gods?"

"Ver-r-ry glad!"

"And you will leave this place and go with me, do you know that?"

"Ver-r-ry glad!"

"We shall ravage, kill, rape and amass treasures!..."

"Ver-r-y glad!..." his host boomed. And the mountains boomed their echo from beyond the oaks in the depths of the ultramarine night.

His host laughed and swayed from side to side with delight. The firelight played on his burly shoulders, on his knees that were as round as haystacks. The soldier ranted on, shouting and lying. There was nothing more beautiful than a burning city... But a burning city was also a terrible place to be. The Persians and Indians would be sniping from every corner, the treasures were destroyed by the flames, the pungent smoke and fumes stung your eyes, the young women threw themselves into the fire and the only captives were the old ones, whom it was unpleasant to kill because their bones and sinews were so tough they blunted your sword. In the end he himself became disillusioned with his own prevarications and, as he stared at the purple flame in the hearth, he remembered the purple in which he had promised to dress Sisyphus.

He said, "The goatskins in which you are clad, o Sisyphus, are of dirty brownish colour. Give them to me..."

"What for?" Sisyphus asked.

"Let me have them for a minute and I'll turn them into purple at once!"

He found another cauldron, filled it with water, quickly got it boiling and sprinkled all his purple dye powders into it. The water seethed purple. Poliander dipped the long wool of the skins, trying not to wet the skins themselves, then he hung them up on sticks near the fire. He stood back admiring the scarlet-tinted wool and dreamed of noisy Corinth acclaiming King Sisyphus, and of Cassander's head lying at his feet, and of himself, Poliander, the commander-in-chief, standing beside Sisyphus.

"We're on our way, o Sisyphus! On our way to glory!" he cried. "What is this miserable valley to you? You never slept

properly because your nights were spent tilling the soil, weeding and watering, catching fish in your nets and wild beasts in your snares. You shall sleep on the softest down, lulled by the songs of beautiful maidens, and you shall sleep long, all morning until noon."

"I'll be ver-r-ry glad ... to sleep..." Sisyphus boomed, and his firm straight mouth opened in a yawn. "Ver-r-ry glad..."

"You shall be the King of Greece and I shall rule with you..." And with these words soldier Poliander lay down on the bed and, as was his custom, put his breast-plate and back-plate under his head, and covered his legs with his oval shield so that the hooks and buckles of the fastenings were on top. At his side he laid his short Argos sword and, having done all this, promptly fell asleep.

He was awakened by the roar of battle. As always he felt a cold, shivering fear that began in the long bones of the foot and spread to the ankle. But, as behoved a soldier of the Great One, he swiftly overcame his fear and sprang up, holding his sword at the ready.

It was early morning. The sounds of the battle died away. The soldier made for a narrow crack of light, screwing up his eyes. The door opened to his touch.

And from the threshold of the hut Poliander saw the yellow-red dawn rising over the scarlet mountains and at the bottom of the valley, bathed in the morning light, a huge black basalt ball was rolling up its groove in the mountain.

And Sisyphus was rolling it.

Then Poliander exclaimed in a voice trembling with astonishment and the after-effects of drinking, "By the dog and the goose I swear, I cannot believe my eyes! Is it you, Sisyphus?! Has not the wise Zeus pardoned you? Did you not agree to come with me to Corinth, and from there, wherever fate should lead us?"

And then Sisyphus replied, still pushing the stone with his shoulder, "My thighs, shins and the soles of my feet are old. The young generation of Greeks marches too fast. I might lag behind and then I should be left to wither somewhere in the East, in the hot sands of the desert... But here... I'm used to it here. I have my beans, my snares for the wild goat, my wine once in a while, and cheese to go with it. What more do I

need? I'm used to it. Go to your Corinth, traveller, and I shall go to my mountain."

And he rolled the stone forward, straining heavily against it.

And before he disappeared from the soldier's view Sisyphus grunted to himself, "I'm ver-r-ry glad to push useless stones against the wind, it is better than to sow swift-sprouting evil..."

He was not accustomed to speaking in such long sentences and so he said it indistinctly. The soldier did not hear his words and, even if he had heard them, it is doubtful if he would have understood.

The burly and powerful Sisyphus became a lean, spare figure as he trudged away, and his stone again turned into a glowing ingot. They both quickly approached the summit of the mountain, whence an invisible force was to hurl the stone back again. The soldier had no wish to hear the stone's horrible whirring and screaming flight and, hurriedly grabbing his accoutrements, he ran to the path, which now stood out clearly before him.

As he strode along the path, he was aware of a painful stabbing in the heart. He had a premonition that Corinth would not welcome him as a kinsman, that his reception would be much cooler than of old. Perhaps it would be better not to go there at all. But where else was his homeland? He was an arrow shot from the bow and there was no fair wind to carry him elsewhere. Who would dye rags and tatters in purple?

And again he looked round at Sisyphus.

Sisyphus was high up now, on the sharp peak of a crag. His goat skins which Poliander had foolishly dyed the night before gleamed purple on his loins. Poliander had wasted the last of his precious purple... And with a burning anguish in his voice he declared, "I swear by the dog and the goose, o Sisyphus! It was not for nothing that Homer called you selfish, wrong-headed and deceitful! O treacherous son of Aeolus, you have deceived me! Is this a sign that I am destined always to be deceived?.."

VASSILY SHUKSHIN

"I'm first and foremost a writer..." Vassily Shukshin (1928-1974) said, speaking of himself. But it was as an actor and film director that he first made his name with the public. He acted in 20 movies, while his own films, "Strange People", "Hobnobbing" and "The Red Snowball Tree", confirmed that Soviet cinema had acquired an outstandingly talented director with a unique style of his own. Meanwhile Shukshin's fame as a writer also grew.

A native of an Altai village, Shukshin wrote mainly about country life, and country folk. His heroes may often appear somewhat cranky, but, first and foremost, they are striking human individuals, and, as such, have a universal appeal.



BY THE THIRD COCK-CROW

A tale about Ivan the Fool and how he went to a faraway land in search of wits and common sense

In a library one day, at about six o'clock in the evening, the characters of Russian classical literature began an argument. Even while the librarian was still at her post, they had surveyed her with interest from their shelves, biding their time. The librarian was making one, last call. Her conversation was odd to say the least, and the characters listened without understanding it. This surprised them.

"Forget it," the librarian was saying, "what crap. He is a billy-goat. Let's go for a groove. Eh? No, he is a billy-goat, I tell you. Let's go for a groove, right? And afterwards to Vladik's. I know he is a goose, but he does have a Gründig. Seal is going to be there too, and what-d'you-call-him ... owl. Yes, I know they are all goats, but we've got to kill time somehow! What? I'm all ears..."

"I can't make head or tail of it," someone in a top hat—Onegin or Chatsky* perhaps—remarked in an undertone to his neighbour, a portly landowner, probably Oblomov**. Oblomov smiled.

"I take it they're off to the zoo."

"But why are they all billy-goats?"

"She's being ironic, presumably. Attractive, eh?"

The gentleman in a top hat frowned. "*Un peu vulgaire*, I'd say."

"French mamselles are all you go for," Oblomov said disapprovingly. "I like it, myself. Shirts above the knee—pretty clever, eh?"

"Far too ... what should I say?" a gentleman with a dejected air, obviously a Chekhov character, broke into the conversation. "...Short. Why?"

Oblomov laughed softly.

"Don't look, then. No one's forcing you to."

"It doesn't worry me, I assure you," a note of embarrassment sounded in the Chekhov character's voice. "Only why did they have to start with the legs?"

"Start what?" Oblomov didn't understand.

"The regeneration, the new life, call it what you will."

"But from where else, old man, if not from between the legs?" quipped Oblomov.

"You haven't changed," the dejected character remarked with ill-concealed disdain.

Oblomov again subsided into quiet laughter.

"Toma!.. Toma!.. You listen to me, now!" the librarian was shouting down the receiver. "Listen to me!.. He's nothing but a billy-goat! Who's got a car? He has? You're kidding?" The librarian relapsed into a long silence, as she listened to what was being said to her. "A doctor of what?" she eventually asked. "You don't say? It's me who is the billy-goat, then."

The librarian was very put out... Laying down the receiver, she sat where she was for some time, then she got to her

**Onegin, Chatsky*—the main characters in Pushkin's novel in verse, *Eugene Onegin* (1823-1831) and in Griboyedov's comedy, *Wit Works Woe* (1822-1824), respectively.—*Ed.*

***Oblomov*—the main character in Goncharov's novel, *Oblomov* (1859).—*Ed.*

feet and walked out of the library, locking the door behind her.

Whereupon the literary characters jumped down off their shelves and began to pull up chairs...

"Quick as you can!" someone shouted, he had the face of a civil servant and was bald. "We'll resume. Who else has anything to add about Ivan the Fool? I'd ask you not to repeat yourself and to be as brief as possible. We must take a decision on this today. Well?"

"May I speak?" The question came from Poor Liza*.

"All yours, Liza," the bald-headed man said.

"I'm of peasant origin too," Poor Liza began, "you all know how poor I am..."

"We do, indeed!" they all shouted. "Keep it brief!"

"I'm ashamed," Poor Liza went on heatedly, "that Ivan the Fool has been put with us. It's too bad! How long is he to go on disgracing our ranks?"

There were shouts of "Expel him!" from the floor.

"Order!" the bald-headed functionary barked. "What do you suggest, Liza?"

"Let him obtain a certificate of intelligence," Liza said.

The suggestion was greeted by noisy approval.

"Quite right!"

"Either that, or he must clear out!"

"You lot aren't half nippy on your pins," said hefty Ilya Muromets**. He sat on his shelf, unable to move. "What a rumpus. Where is he to get one from? It's alright for you to talk..."

"From the Wise Man," the bald-headed functionary who was chairing the meeting, thumped the table angrily. "I didn't give you permission to speak, Ilya!"

"And I didn't ask for it. Shut your trap! Or I'll pour ink down your gizzard and stuff your gob with blotting-paper. You office rat."

"There you go again!" Oblomov said grumpily. "Ilya, why do you always have to let off steam? What's wrong with the suggestion? Let him obtain a certificate. Sitting beside a fool makes it awkward for me too. His foot bindings smell... I don't believe anyone likes..."

**Poor Liza*—the heroine of the story, "Poor Liza", by Karamzin (1766-1826).—*Ed.*

***Ilya Muromets*—a hero of Russian fairy tales and legends.—*Ed.*

"Shush!" Ilya roared. "Awkward, indeed... Want a club on the head for good measure? I can reach you!"

Here someone, obviously belonging to the category of superfluous men*, noted:

"Intestine strife."

"What?" the functionary hadn't understood.

"Intestine strife," the Superfluous man repeated. "We've had it."

"Who's had it?" Ilya too, apparently, was oblivious to the danger of which the Superfluous man spoke. "Sit tight, hussar! Or you'll regret it!"

"I demand satisfaction!" the Superfluous character jumped to his feet.

"Do sit down!" said the functionary. "What do you mean by satisfaction?"

"I demand satisfaction: that Karacharovo** stay-at-home insulted me."

"Sit down," Oblomov said too. "What's to be done with Ivan?"

They all sat there thinking.

Ivan the Fool sat in a corner doing something to the hem of his peasant's coat which made it look like an ear.

"Think away, think away," he jeered. "What a bunch of nitwits!"

"Don't be rude, Ivan," the functionary said. "They are thinking how to help him, see, and he sits there swearing. What do you say to the certificate idea, Ivan? Will you go for one?"

"Where to?"

"To the Wise Man. Something has to be done I'm also inclined to think..."

"Well, I'm not, that's for sure!" Ilya blurted out again. "Inclined to, my foot!.. Let him be to his heart's content. Stay

**Superfluous men*—the "superfluous man" was an important character type in Russian nineteenth century literature (see the works of Pushkin, Lermontov, Turgenev and others). The term denotes a hero sensitive to social and ethical problems and yet who is unable to act in the autocratic, conservative society of his day with its serfdom and top-heavy bureaucracy.—*Ed.*

***Karacharovo*—the place where, according to legend, Ilya Muromets sat put for all of thirty-three years before setting off to perform his feats.—*Ed.*

right where you are, Ivan. A certificate, indeed... What ever next? Who jumped up with that bright idea? You, Liza? What're you after, girl?"

"Nothing!" Liza exclaimed. "We don't all have to stay put, just because you do, you know! Your armchair propaganda won't wash with us, Uncle Ilya! I support our chairman's suggestion: something has to be done." And she repeated, her voice ringing with conviction: "Something has to be done!"

They all sat lost in thought.

Ilya's face, though, was wreathed in frowns.

"What do you mean by propaganda?" he growled. "She will think up anything, given a chance. What propaganda?"

"You were told, what sort!" Oblomov turned on him. "Armchair, that's what. 'What propaganda?', he asks. Quiet please. It goes without saying, something has to be done, friends. The thing is though: what?"

"All the same, I demand satisfaction!" the Superfluous man said, remembering how he'd been insulted. "I challenge this loudmouth (to Ilya) to a duel."

"Sit down!" the functionary shouted at the Superfluous man. "We are here to work, not to fight duels. Stop fooling around. There's been enough killing, as it is... Our job is to work, not to run about woods with pistols."

The word "pistol" struck home, there were shouts of noisy approval.

"If I had my way, I'd ban all duels!" pale Lensky* cried.

"Coward!" Onegin said to him.

"Who's a coward?"

"You."

"And you are a good-for-nothing card-sharper. A debauchee and a cynic."

"Let's be off the Volga!" a boisterous Cossack chieftain suddenly cried. "Go for the fo'c'sle, fellas!"**

"Sit down, will you?!" the functionary sounded really angry. "Or I'll 'fo'c'sle' you. I'll move you way behind the

**Lensky*—a character from the above-named novel in verse by Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin.—Ed.*

***Go for the fo'c'sle, fellas!*—according to tradition, this was what the Cossack chieftain, Stepan Razin, and his gang of stalwarts used to cry on boarding the vessels of their adversaries (17th century).—*Ed.*

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cupboard—that'll show you. Once again I ask: what are we going to do?"

"Come over here, chief," Ilya called to the Cossack. "Got a thing or two to tell you."

"I'm warning you," the functionary said, "you start a brawl and you'll get it in the neck. Talk about a bunch of clever dicks."

"Can't say a thing round here!" Ilya muttered in an injured tone. "What's got into you? You are worse than a pack of wild dogs, in God's truth: whatever one says is taken the wrong way."

"Only please spare us the 'we alone are from the people' act," Onegin drawled, addressing Ilya and the Cossack, "we are Russians too, you know."

"Any minute now they'll start thumping their breasts and tearing their shirts to shreds," remarked a certain petty personage, not unlike Gogol's Akaky Akakyevich*. "Or chew their sleeves..."

"Why chew my sleeves?" The Cossack chieftain was genuinely puzzled. "When all I've got to do is set you down on the palm of one hand and squeeze the life out of you with the other."

"We've had it, intestine strife," the Superfluous character remarked in a gloomy voice. "We won't get a thing done now and we'll perish into the bargain."

"Off to the Volga!" the Cossack shouted again. "Make merry while the going's good!"

"Pipe down," Oblomov said, angrily. "You old soak. All you ever think of is making merry! We've got work to do."

"A-ha!" the Cossack suddenly muttered in a sinister drawl. "Whom have I been waiting for, then, all my life? You are just my cup of tea, you are," and he pulled his sabre out of its sheath. "Whose blood is going to run, boys?"

They all made a dash for it...

Akaky Akakyevich scurried back onto his shelf like a little mouse. Poor Liza crouched down, covering her face with her pinafore-dress. Onegin nervously cocked his duelling pistol, while Ilya Muromets laughed and said:

**Akaky Akakyevich*— the main character in Gogol's story, "The Overcoat" (1842), epitomizes the "small man" in Russian literary criticism.—*Ed.*

"O-ho! See them run! They soon turned tail, they did, the little devils!"

Shielding himself from the Cossack with a chair, Oblomov was shouting at the top of his voice:

"You ask the literary historians! I was a good character, I was! I'm just hopelessly lazy. Wouldn't hurt a fly though!"

"We'll soon see about that," said the Cossack, "we'll soon see, my sabre doesn't mow down good people."

The functionary was about to give the Cossack a push when the latter lunged at him: the functionary jumped back.

"Go it, Cossack," Ilya bawled. "Shed pagan blood!"

And the lord knows what would have happened next had it not been for Akaky Akakyevich who, in the midst of the general confusion, suddenly jumped up and shouted:

"Closed for stock-taking!"

Whereupon everyone froze and came to their senses. The Cossack put away his sabre, Oblomov mopped his face with his handkerchief and Liza got to her feet, coyly pulling down her pinafore-dress.

"That's Asia for you," said the functionary in a quiet, bitter voice. "What can one do in a place like this! Thank you, Akaky. It somehow didn't occur to me to close for stock-taking."

"Got any wine, Ilya?" the Cossack asked Muromets.

"No," the latter said. "I don't drink."

"I don't half feel depressed," the Cossack muttered. "I'll have to drown it in wine or else..."

"There was nothing to fly off the handle about, see?" the functionary said. "Let's resume. Liza, what was it you suggested?"

"I suggest Ivan the Fool goes to get a certificate from the Wise Man," said Liza, her voice ringing with conviction. "If he isn't back with the certificate by the third cock-crow, he should ... clear off."

"Where's he to go to?" Ilya inquired with feeling.

"Why not to a secondhand bookshop?" Liza snapped.

"Ough, that's a bit harsh, isn't it?" someone remarked doubtfully.

"Not a bit of it," the functionary said, just as severely as Liza. "Not a bit of it. That's the answer, Ivan..."

"Three bags full, sir," said Ivan. And he got to his feet.

"Off you go."

Ivan looked at Ilya.

Ilya hung his head and didn't utter a word. And the Cossack too stayed silent, he had an agonized look on his face, his eyes roved over the shelves and table—his mind, evidently was still on drink.

"Off you go, Ivan," Ilya said softly. "There's nothing for it. There's no getting round this bunch of ... know-alls. But remember this: you won't burn in fire and you won't drown in water. I can't vouch for the rest."

"Want my sabre?" the Cossack asked.

"What for?"

"Don't be afraid. Ivan," Ilya put in, "I'll be thinking of you. Whenever disaster is about to strike or you're about to go under, I'll shout: 'Watch out, Ivan!' "

"How will you know when disaster is about to strike?" asked the Cossack.

"I'll know alright. I'll feel it in my bones. And you'll hear my voice."

Walking out into the middle of the room, Ivan gave them all a low bow. Then pulling his peasant's coat tighter round him, he made for the library door.

"Remember me with a kind word, if I get bumped off somewhere," he said from the door.

"Come back with the certificate, Ivan," Liza sounded agitated, "and I'll marry you."

"Over my dead body," Ivan answered rudely. "I'd do better to hitch up to some princess or other."

"Forget it, Ivan," said Ilya, with a dismissive way of his hand. "Best not get involved. They are none of them better than she is," and he pointed at Liza. "What's got into you, lass? What do you need that darned certificate for? Why send the lad off at dead of night! How do you know your Wise Man will give him a certificate, anyway? He's just as conceited as the rest of them, I'm sure..."

"He has to have a certificate, Uncle Ilya," Liza said in a determined voice. "As for you, Ivan, I'll get my own back on you for turning me down, you see if I don't."

"Off you go, Ivan," said the functionary. "Time is getting on, you won't make it otherwise."

"All the best," said Ivan. And with that he left. Once out in the wide world, he followed his nose.

It was very dark. He walked and walked until he reached a forest. He had no idea which way to go next, so he sat down on a tree stump in despair.

"My poor, old head," he said, "You've had it. How can I find the Wise Man? If only someone would help?"

But no one helped. So Ivan sat and sat and then walked on.

On and on he walked till he saw a light shining. When he got closer he found it was a hut on hen's legs* and piled up round it were bricks, slate and all sorts of wooden planks.

"Is anyone at home?" Ivan cried.

Baba Yaga, the witch, appeared on the porch. She looked at Ivan and asked:

"Who are you and where are you making for?"

"Ivan the Fool, I'm on my way to the Wise Man for a certificate," Ivan answered. "But the thing is, I don't know where to find him."

"What do you need a certificate for?"

"Don't know that, either... I was told to get one."

"Ah-ha," Baba Yaga muttered. "Come along in, you could do with a rest after your journey, I expect. You'd probably like a bite to eat too?"

"I wouldn't say no."

"Follow me then."

Ivan entered the hut.

It was a hut much like any other. With a big stove, table and two beds...

"Who else lives here?" Ivan asked.

"My daughter," Baba Yaga said. "What about you, Ivan the Fool, are you a complete fool, I wonder?"

"What d'you mean?" Ivan was puzzled.

"Are you a real fool, or did someone just call you that on the spur of the moment? It can happen, you know, one gets upset and shouts: Oh, what a fool! You, little fool, I sometimes yell at my daughter! And she's no fool, I can tell you that, she's ever so bright. Perhaps it is the same with you? People have got used to calling you a fool and all that, though you aren't at all, just a bit ... guileless. Eh?"

"What you driving at?"

**Hut on hen's legs*—a traditional feature in Russian fairy tales.—*Ed.*

"You're no fool, I can see that, you're just a wee bit naive. As soon as I set eyes on you, I thought: 'That's a talented lad, alright!' Don't tell me you really thought you were a fool?"

"Of course, I didn't!" Ivan said angrily. "How could I possibly think that?"

"What did I tell you? That's people all over for you, eh? Tell me, you ever done any building?"

"Sure. I've built a castle or two, with Dad and my brothers. Why?"

"You see, I want to build myself a cottage. They delivered the building materials, but there is no one to put it up. What about you doing the job?"

"But I've got to get a certificate."

"What on earth for?!" Baba Yaga exclaimed. "Build the cottage and it will speak for itself—I get all sorts calling on me. As soon as my visitors set eyes on the cottage, they'll ask straight off: who built that? Who? Ivan, of course. D'you get me? Your fame will travel right through the forest."

"But what about the certificate?" Ivan asked again. "They won't let me back without it."

"So what?"

"What do you mean? Where shall I go?"

"You can be cottage boilerman. When you start building, plan yourself a room in the cellar. It will be nice and cosy there, and quiet, no worries to speak of. When the guests upstairs get bored—where will they make for? For Ivan's, of course: to listen to his yarns. And you lay the paint on nice and thick, tell them one tall story after another. I'll see you come to no harm. I'll call you Ivanushka."

"You old harridan," said Ivan. "What a web you've spun! So you'll call me Ivanushka and I'm to break my back for you, eh? It's no go, Granma!"

"Ah-ha!" Baba Yaga said in a menacing voice. "I've seen the likes of you before: you doublecrossing rogue, you! You know what we do to your sort, don't you? We roast you alive. Ho there! Who's on duty?!" And Baba Yaga thrice clapped her hands. "Guards! Take this fool and tie him up, we'll give him a bit of a roasting."

Whereupon four hefty men seized hold of Ivan, tied him up, and threw him down on the bench.

"I'll give you one more chance," Baba Yaga had another go, "will you build me a cottage?"

"Damn you!" bound Ivan shouted proudly. "You old scarecrow! You've got bristles growing out of your nose."

"Into the stove with him!" Baba Yaga screamed, stamping her feet with rage. "You boorish lout, you!"

"You're a lout yourself!" Ivan shouted back. "Viper! You've got a bristly tongue, not to speak of your nose! Talk about a vampire!"

"Into the flames with him!" Baba Yaga was beside herself with rage. "Right in!"

Seizing hold of Ivan, the guards began to push him through the stove door.

"*I didn't half give you a shaving on the hillock,*" Ivan sang at the top of his voice. "*And you gave me a pair of lace-up flippity-flops! Diddle-me-diddle-me-dandy-o!* Fire won't burn me, witch, I'm not a bit afraid!"

No sooner had Ivan been shoved into the stove, than the sound of sleigh bells and neighing horses came from the courtyard.

"That's my daughter," Baba Yaga said, overjoyed, and looked out of the window. "Oh-ho, and her bridegroom too! We've got a good supper for them and all."

The guards were also pleased. They jumped up and down, clapping their hands.

"Serpent Gorynych is coming, Serpent Gorynych is coming!" they cried. "We are going to have a ball of a time and get blind drunk!"

Baba Yaga's daughter came into the hut, she too was very ugly with moustaches.

"Fe, fi, fo, fum," she said. "I smell the blood of a Russian man. Who is it?"

"Supper," said Baba Yaga. And gave a hoarse laugh: "Ha-ha-ha!"

"What's got into you?" her daughter asked angrily. "Stop cackling and tell me who's here."

"We are roasting Ivan."

"You're never!" Baba Yaga's daughter was pleasantly taken aback. "Fancy that, now!"

"Can you imagine, the little blighter doesn't want the forest to be more beautiful, he won't build me a cottage."

Baba Yaga's daughter peered into the stove. From whence there came a noise that was not exactly crying, but then nor was it laughter.

"Help, I can't take any more!" Ivan groaned. "It's not the flames, it's laughter that will be the death of me!"

"What's he on about?" Baba Yaga's daughter asked in a cross voice. Baba Yaga went over to the stove too. "What's got into him?"

"Is he laughing?"

"What's got into you, eh?"

"Oh, it's too much!" Ivan bawled. "I'll never survive this!"

"What's up, you idiot?" Baba Yaga's daughter asked.

"It's your ... moustaches! Lord, luv-a-duck, have you ever seen anything like them! How on earth will you sleep with your hubbie? You are thinking of getting married, I take it?"

"Sure... What's so funny?" Baba Yaga's daughter didn't understand. She was a bit nervous, all the same though.

"It's your moustaches!"

"What of them? They don't bother me, on the contrary, I can smell better."

"That's as may be, but what about your hubbie? When you get married, that is?.."

"What about him? Stop beating about the bush, you idiot! What you getting at?" Baba Yaga's daughter was really on edge now.

"Surely you see? He'll kiss you in the dark and think to himself: 'What the devil is this: a trooper?' And fall out of love with you just like that. Who's ever heard of a woman with moustaches! These witches are the end! They don't understand a damn thing. He won't live with you, you know, not with moustaches like that! He could well turn round and bite your head off in a fit of rage, I know those Gorynyches."

Baba Yaga and her daughter relapsed into silence.

"Out you come," Baba Yaga's daughter ordered.

Ivan the Fool quickly climbed out of the stove and shook himself.

"Nice and warm in there."

"What do you suggest we do?" Baba Yaga asked. "About the moustaches, I mean."

"I've told you ... If you want a happy married life, you'll have to get rid of them."

"How?"

"I'll tell you and you'll chuck me back into the stove again, right?"

"We won't, Ivan, I promise," Baba Yaga's daughter said in a friendly voice. "We'll let you go free, just so long as you tell me how to get rid of my moustaches."

At this our Ivan started to play for time and to bargain, just as present-day plumbers are wont to do.

"It's a tricky business," he said, "we have to mix up a concoction."

"Get cracking, then!"

"Yes, yes, but what about the Wise Man? I have to be back by the third cock-crow."

"You listen to me!" Baba Yaga put in, quickly. "Get rid of the moustaches and I'll lend you my broomstick: you'll be with the Wise Man, then, in two shakes of a duck's tail."

Ivan thought it over.

"Buck up!" said Baba Yaga's moustached daughter. "Or Gorynych will be here."

At this Ivan got nervous too.

"He's not coming in here, is he?" He asked.

"Well?"

"He'll gobble me upright off."

"I wouldn't put it past him," Baba Yaga's daughter muttered. "What shall we do?"

"I'll tell him you're my nephew," Baba Yaga said. "Get the idea?"

"Right," Ivan did. "Now remember: the concoction doesn't work immediately."

"What d'you mean?" Baba Yaga's daughter inquired warily.

"We'll mix it straight away and put a mask on your face. Right? Then I'll fly off to the Wise Man, while you lie under the mask..."

"Sure he won't do the dirty on us, Ma?" Baba Yaga's daughter asked suspiciously.

"Just let him try," Baba Yaga replied. "If he so much as thinks of swindling us, he will come back from his broom-ride through the heavens a total write-off."

"Holy smoke!" Ivan was on edge again, apparently he had been thinking of playing a fast one. "What have people come

to nowadays, I ask you! What's up? You like going round with moustaches, is that it? Keep them then for all I care. One tries to be helpful, see, and they start... What about showing a little more respect?"

"What's 'respect' got to do with it? Stop hedging..."

"I can't take anymore," Ivan went on jabbering away at nine to the dozen. "I really can't. On my honour! It breaks my heart. What have people come to nowadays! Keep your moustaches. What do I care? Hardly a woman, more like a major-general, I'd say. Ugh! And what about when you have kids? Your baby son or daughter will put out a chubby paw and ask: 'What's that, Mum?' And when your son grows up? Just think how he'll be teased in the street: 'Your Ma's got moustaches, your Ma's got moustaches!' Won't half make life difficult for him, he'll be really upset. No one else's Mum has moustaches, except for his. What will he say to them? Darn it. He'll just burst into tears and go home—to his moustached Mum."

"That's enough!" Baba Yaga's daughter cried. "Mix your concoction. What do you need for it?"

"A fistful of chicken droppings, a fistful of warm manure and a fistful of soft clay—then we'll mix it up and smear your face with it..."

"All over? How will I breathe?"

"Oh, what have people come to nowadays!" Ivan was off again. "It's impossible to do anything..."

"Alright!" Baba Yaga's daughter snapped, "I was only asking!"

"Don't!" Ivan snapped back. "When an expert is at work, he mustn't be interrupted! I repeat: manure, clay, droppings. The mask will have a hole in it, so you'll be able to breathe, alright."

"Did you hear that?" Baba Yaga asked her guards. "Jump to it! Quick march!"

The guards ran off in search of manure, clay and chicken droppings.

And it was at this very moment that Serpent Gorynych thrust his three heads through the window... All three heads stared at Ivan. Everyone in the hut turned pale. Gorynych looked at Ivan for a long, long time, then he asked:

"Who is that?"

"That's Ivan, my nephew, Gorynych," Baba Yaga said. "Ivan, say hello to Uncle Gorynych."

"Hello, Uncle Gorynych," said Ivan. "How are you keeping?"

Gorynych looked hard at Ivan. He looked so hard at him and for such a long time, that Ivan got the wind up.

"Holy smoke, what is it now? What's wrong? I'm her nephew, you heard what she said! Come to call on Auntie. Are we going to gobble up visitors, then? O.K., go right ahead. And what about the family we are thinking of raising? Gobble them all up too, eh? What a father!"

Gorynych's three heads consulted each other.

"I think he's being rude," the first one said.

The second one reflected for a moment and then muttered:

"He's a fool and, what is more, he's nervous."

The third head expressed herself very briefly:

"Mince," was all she said.

"I'll give you mince!" Ivan was beside himself with terror. "I'll make such mincemeat out of a certain person round here that he won't like it at all. Where's my magic sword, Auntie?" And Ivan jumped up from the bench and ran round the hut pretending he was looking for his sword. "I'll show you! I'll cut your heads off in the twinkling of an eyelid!" Ivan shouted at Gorynych. He didn't look at him, though, for those three staring heads gave him the shivers. "I'll show you!"

"That's really going too far!" the first head said.

"He's a bag of nerves," the second head remarked.

The third head didn't have a chance to say anything for Ivan stopped right in front of Gorynych and stared at him in turn for a long, long time.

"You rogue," Ivan said, "I'll boggle you up myself, see if I don't."

At this point, Ilya Muromets' voice was heard for the first time.

"Watch out, Ivan!" he shouted.

"What you 'Ivaning' me for!" Ivan burst out. "What's the big idea? We are perpetually afraid of people, cringe slavishly before them, that's our trouble. Every nit will behave as if it is an important personage, given a chance, and we stand there, quaking in our shoes. Well, I'm not going to any longer, I've

had enough!" And sitting down calmly on the bench, Ivan got out his pipe and began to play it. "Why not gobble me up," he said after a while, laying down his pipe. "Go on, then, if you want to, you dirty skunk! Then kiss your hairy-faced bride, produce your hairy-faced children and parade round with them. You aren't frightening me, you old sod!" And Ivan went back to playing his pipe.

"Gorynych," said Baba Yaga's daughter, "don't take any notice of him."

"But he is being so rude," the first head objected. "His language!"

"He's out of his mind. He doesn't realise what he is saying."

"That's just where you are wrong," Ivan put in, interrupting his playing. "I know exactly what I'm doing. I'm just about to select a march for your forthcoming battalion..."

"Ivan," Baba Yaga said in a meek voice, "don't answer back. Why you behaving so badly?"

"No one is going to bluff me, see? He thinks he's only got to roll his eyes round and we'll all cower! Keep that sort of thing for your hairy-faced offspring—that's when to roll your eyes round, not now."

"Too insolent for words!" the first head said, all but in tears. "I ask you..."

"Go on, have a good cry," Ivan said harshly. "While we snigger."

"Stop playing for time," the second head said.

"Quite," Ivan agreed. "Why play for time? Stop dilly-dallying!"

"Whoa!" exclaimed the third head. "What cheek!"

"Hm... Hm!" Ivan agreed again in a mocking voice. "Ivan's really letting fly! What about a sing-song?" And he sang:

I didn't half give you a shaving
On the hillock,
And you gave me a pair of
Lace-up flippity-flops.

"Come on, join in the chorus, Gorynych! *Diddle-me-diddle-me-dandy-o!*" Ivan prompted.

It was so quiet, you could have heard a pin drop.

"Can you sing romances?" Gorynych eventually asked.

"What sort?"

"Old ones."

"Sure... You fond of them, then? I can sing you romances till you have them coming out of your ears, if you like. Take this one:

Khaz-bulat, my brave man,
Old and poor is your home,
While I'm rich and I can
Drown you in piles of gold.

"What about that for a romance, eh?" Sensing a change in Gorynych's mood, Ivan went up to him and patted one of his heads on the cheek. "Ough, you little wild cat, you..."

"Watch it," said Gorynych. "Or I'll bite your hand off."

Ivan hastily pulled his hand away.

"Come, come," he said in a conciliatory tone. "That's not the way to talk to a star turn. I might stop singing."

"You try," said the head Ivan had just patted. "And I'll bite your loaf off."

There was loud laughter from the other two heads. Ivan laughed too, though he wasn't really in a laughing mood.

"Won't be able to sing if you do that," he protested.

"Nice bit of sirloin," muttered the head which not long ago had said "mince". She was the silliest of all the heads.

"Food!" Ivan rounded on her. "That's all you ever think of! What a little monster!"

"Ivan, stop being so obstinate!" Baba Yaga said reprovingly. "Sing."

"Sing," said Baba Yaga's daughter, echoing her mother. "You've talked too much, as it is. You sing ever so well, go on."

"Sing," ordered the first head. "And that means you too."

"Who?" Baba Yaga didn't get her. "Us?"

"Yes. All of you sing."

"Perhaps it would be best if I sang alone?" Baba Yaga's daughter objected; she didn't like the idea of being chorus to Ivan. "Singing with a man ... excuse me and all that, but..."

"One, two... Off you go," Gorynych appeared not to have heard her.

I shall give you my horse,

sang Ivan. And Baba Yaga and her daughter joined in:

My rich saddle and my knife,
And from you I want naught
But your beautiful wife.
Look, you're old and you're grey
And no match to your wife.
You will ruin and destroy
The poor soul's young dear life.

Gorynych's impassive, round eyes were moist round the corners: like all despots he was given to tears.

"Go on," he said softly.

'Neath the green willow tree,

Ivan sang,

We were talking all night,
And the moon from the sky
*Sent its silent blue light.**

And then Ivan sang it again, with feeling:

And the moon from the sky
Sent its silent blue light.

"How're things, Ivan?" Gorynych asked, he was deeply moved.

"How do you mean?"

"Got a good hut?"

"Hm, hm. I'm living in the library at present, with all the rest."

"Want a hut of your own?"

"What the devil for?"

"Go on."

She surrendered to me
Till her last dying day...

*Translated by Ludmilla Kirzhner.—*Ed.*

"Not that," said Gorynych. "Leave it out."

"How do you mean?" Ivan was puzzled.

"Skip it."

"One can't do that, Gorynych," Ivan smiled, "one can't just drop words from a song."

Gorynych stared at Ivan without saying anything: an uneasy silence followed.

"It spoils the tune!" Ivan said nervously.

"Not a bit of it," said Gorynych.

"It does, it does!"

"On the contrary, it is better without—more laconic."

"Just see what they get up to!" Ivan hit himself on the hips in astonishment. "They are a law unto themselves, they are! Think they can do anything they like. It spoils the tune, it spoils the tune! I won't sing it shorter. So there!"

"Ivan," said Baba Yaga, "don't be so uppity."

"To hell with you!" Ivan lost his temper. "You sing. I'm not going to. I'll gobble the lot of you up! Moustaches and all. As for those three pumpkins ... I'll give them a bit of a roasting too."

"Lord, the patience one has to have," the first head sighed. "The amount of effort it takes to teach them anything, not to speak of the cost to one's nerves. They have neither breeding nor education..."

" 'A bit of a roasting'—he put that quite well, eh?" the second head muttered.

"Where are the moustaches you keep talking about?" the third head asked Ivan. "I've heard nothing else the whole evening. Who has got moustaches?"

The lad's flaxen moustache
Twitched as he smiled at her,

the first head sang in a flippant tone. "How does it go on—the Khaz-bulat song, I mean?"

"She surrendered to me," Ivan said in a loud voice.

There was another silence.

"That was very vulgar, Ivan," said the first head. "Very poor taste. Shame on you. You live in a library after all. They are a splendid crowd there. How did you come by your sexuality, that's what puzzles me? Poor Liza's there, right? A fine lass, I knew her father... She's your sweetheart, I take it?"

"Who? Liza? You must be joking!"

"But she's waiting for you."

"She can wait till the cows come home, for all I care!"

"Hm, a rum bird," said the second head. But the head who thought about grub and nothing else, disagreed:

"That's no bird," she said in all seriousness. "Not a bit of it. Might as well say mince in that case. Or even shashlik, perhaps."

"How does it go on?" the first head asked, reminded of the song about Khaz-bulat.

"He killed him." Ivan said submissively.

"Killed who?"

"Khaz-bulat."

"Who did?"

"Hm...m..." Ivan frowned and then added: "The young lover did. The song ends like this: *And the old man's grey head fell and rolled down the dale.*"

"That must go too. It's too cruel," said the head.

"How's it to end, then?"

The head thought for a while.

"They make it up. He gave him back his horse and his saddle—and the two of them went home and lived happily ever after. What shelf are you on in that library of yours?"

"The top shelf. Next to Ilya and the Cossack from the Don."

"Ough!" they all gasped.

"That follows," said the first and most intelligent head. "Keep company with fools and it rubs off. Why you going to the Wise Man?"

"For a certificate."

"What sort of certificate?"

"An intelligence certificate."

Gorynych's three heads chortled with laughter. Baba Yaga and her daughter sniggered too.

"Can you dance?" asked the intelligent head.

"Yep," Ivan replied, "I'm not going to though."

"I have an idea he can build cottages too," Baba Yaga put in. "As a matter of fact, we've already had a little talk about it."

"Quiet!" Gorynych's three heads bellowed all at once. "No one gave you permission to speak!"

"Good gracious!" Baba Yaga whispered. "One can't so much as open one's mouth."

"That's right!" Baba Yaga's daughter snapped, going for her mother too. "Talk about a parrot-house!"

"Give us a dance, Ivan," the most intelligent head said in a gentle voice.

"No," Ivan replied obstinately.

The head thought for a bit.

"You're going for a certificate," she said. "Am I right?"

"That's it."

"And the certificate will say: 'This is to certify that Ivan is clever.' Correct? And it will have a stamp on it."

"Well?"

"You won't make it, you know." The intelligent head gazed impassively at Ivan. "You'll never obtain a certificate."

"Why won't I? Once I start off, I'll get there sooner or later."

"No." The head was still gazing at Ivan. "You won't. You won't be leaving this room even."

Ivan stood, agonizing. Then, lifting his hand, he announced in a subdued voice:

"The Larder!"

"One, two, and off you go," said the head.

Baba Yaga and her daughter started singing:

Oh, my little larder,
My new, little larder...

And as they sang, they beat time with their hands.

My brand-new, latticed larder...

Ivan danced round in a circle, stamping with his bast sandals. But his arms hung limp at his sides: he neither crossed them, nor threw back his head, nor did he look as proud as a falcon as is usual in a Russian dance.

"Why aren't you looking as proud as a falcon?" asked the head.

"I am," Ivan answered.

"But you're staring at the ground."

"Isn't a falcon allowed to think then?"

"What about?"

"About life in general. How to raise its brood. Have pity on me, Gorynych," Ivan begged. "How long is this going to go on for? I've had enough!"

"Ah-ha," said the intelligent head. "We've come to our senses, at long last. You can go for your certificate, if you like, now that you've stopped throwing your weight around. Whippersnappers. Fiddlers. What on earth came over you?"

Ivan stayed silent.

"Stand with your face to the door," Gorynych ordered.

Ivan did as he was told.

"As soon as I give the word you'll fly out of here at the speed of sound."

"Of sound? That's pushing it a bit, isn't it, Gorynych?" Ivan objected. "I won't be up to it."

"As you like. On your marks. Ready, steady!.."

And Ivan flew out of the hut.

The three-headed serpent and Baba Yaga and her daughter collapsed in laughter.

"Come over here," Gorynych called to his bride-to-be, "I feel like a bit of a cuddle."

As for Ivan, he was again trudging through the dark forest... Again there was no path to speak of, just a narrow track made by wild beasts. On and on Ivan walked, then he sat himself down on a fallen tree-trunk and gave way to despair.

"I feel as if I've had my soul rubbed in manure," he muttered sadly. "That's how downhearted I feel! This certificate isn't half taking it out of me..."

A bear came up from behind him and sat on the tree-trunk too.

"Why you looking so gloomy?" the bear inquired.

"You can ask that again!" said Ivan. "First I was frightened out of my wits, then I was made to sing, then I was made to dance ... And now I feel so depressed, I'm ready to hang my head and die."

"Where did all this happen?"

"At Baba Yaga's. Damn it! It was all the devil's doing."

"Fine person you picked to go and visit. Why did you show up there?"

"I dropped by on the way..."

"Where to?"

"To the Wise Man."

"So, that's it!" said the bear in a surprised voice. "It's a fairish distance."

"Can you direct me?"

"No. I've heard of him, of course, but I couldn't say where he hangs out, I'm sure. I've left home too, brother. I'm on the road: though where I'm heading for is anyone's guess."

"Were you chucked out then?"

"Not exactly ... there was no choice, see, but to up sticks. There's a monastery not far from here and life was pretty good... I used to feed close by it—there were a lot of beehives. Then the devils set their sights on the monastery too. It beats me where they all sprang from! The whole place is teeming with them, though they aren't allowed inside, of course. From morning to dusk, they play music, drink and behave in a most abominable manner."

"What do they want?"

"To get in, but the gates are guarded. So they try and deafen them, the guards that is, lure them away with loose women, get them drunk, set them on the downward path, in other words. They've started up such a racket in the area that the only thing to do is to take to one's heels. It's quite dreadful, their goings-on, certainly no place for the likes of us. They even taught me to smoke..." having said which the bear got out a packet of cigarettes and lit one. "Life became quite impossible... I thought and thought, no, I says to myself, I'd best be going before they make a drunkard out of me. Or I end up in the circus. They got me dead drunk on two occasions."

"That's really bad."

"You can say that again! I beat up my old woman ... went after lions in the forest... Covered myself in shame, in fact! No, I thinks to myself, I'd best be on the move. And here I am."

"Do you think they've heard of the Wise Man?" Ivan asked.

"Who? The devils? What they don't know is no one's business. They know everything. Only don't get involved with 'em, or you'll be done for. I mean that, lad."

"Go on with you!"

"No joking, lad. You might give it a try, of course, but keep your eyes skinned. They are an evil lot!"

"I feel pretty evil-minded, myself, at the moment... A match for any devil. And it's all his doing. He maimed me, broke me."

"Who did?"

"Serpent Gorynych."

"Did he beat you up, then?"

"Much worse... He made me sing, and dance for him. Ugh! It would have been better if he had beaten me up."

"He humiliated you, right?"

"And how! I'll never get over it. What about going back and setting fire to him. Eh?"

"Forget it!" said the bear. "Keep out of harm's way. Serpent Gorynych is bad news... A real scoundrel, in fact. Forget it. You'd best clear off. And thank your lucky stars you got away alive. You'll never get the better of that gang: they'll catch up with you anywhere."

They sat in silence, the bear took a last puff at his cigarette, threw it away, trod the stub into the ground with his paw, and got up.

"So long."

"So long," Ivan said and he stood up too.

"Watch your step with those devils," the bear advised again. "They're much worse than Serpent Gorynych... You'll forget where you are going, you'll forget everything. They're an insolent bunch and as cunning as they come, into the bargain. Before you know where you are they'll have collared you, taken you in tow."

"Never mind," said Ivan. "Nothing ventured, nothing gained. I'll manage somehow. I've simply got to find the Wise Man—what a job and a half I've been landed with! And I've only got till the third cock-crow."

"Well, you'd better be going, if that's how it is. Bye."

"Bye."

And they parted.

Out of the darkness, came a final shout from the bear:

"Hear the music, way yonder?"

"Where?"

"Listen, listen! It's 'Dark Eyes' they're playing."

"Yes, I can hear it."

"Follow the music—it's them. My, they aren't half bashing it out! Oh, dearie me!" the bear sighed. "Talk about worldly vanity! The marshes aren't good enough for them, oh no, it's life in the cells they are after."

Ivan came to some gates and a high fence. Over the gates was the following sign:

"No admittance to Devils."

Standing in the gateway was a tall watchman with a pike in his hand. He was keeping watch.

Round about, a moderate degree of bedlam was in evidence—a pause, evidently, from a wild orgy. One of the devils, with hands thrust in the pockets of tight-fitting trousers, was beating out a lazy tap-dance with its hooves, another was thumbing through some illustrated magazine, yet another was shuffling cards. One was juggling with skulls. Two were practising standing on their heads in a corner. Another group, having laid out newspapers on the ground, were sitting, drinking, round bottles of brandy and hors-d'oeuvres, while four more, three musicians with guitars and a young girl, were standing right in front of the watchman: the girl was singing "Dark-Eyes", a gipsy song. She sang well and the guitarists were putting all they'd got into the accompaniment. As for the girl herself, she was extremely attractive with shapely hooves and clad in well-cut slacks. The watchman, however, was gazing at her without showing the slightest sign of interest. He even gave a condescending smile.

"Hi!" said Ivan, going up to the devils who were drinking.

Having examined him from top to toe, they turned away.

"Why don't you invite me to join you," Ivan asked sternly.

They stared at him again.

"Who do you think you are then, the Grand Prince himself?" asked a fat devil with huge horns.

"That's it. And if you don't watch out I'll give you such a bumpy ride, that you won't know whether you're coming or going. Get up!"

The devils gazed at Ivan, open-mouthed.

"Did you hear what I said?!" Ivan shouted, kicking the bottles over. "Get up!!!"

The fat devil jumped up and would have gone for Ivan had he not been seized by his mates and dragged off to one side.

A very elegant devil now appeared before Ivan, of about medium build, and wearing glasses.

"What's up, son?" he asked, taking Ivan by the arm. "Why are we making so much noise, eh? Is something hurting? Or are we in a bad mood? Tell me, what's the matter?"

"I want a certificate," Ivan said crossly.

Some other devils came up and a circle was formed in the middle of which stood angry Ivan.

"Keep on the good work," the elegant devil shouted to the girl and to the musicians. "What sort of a certificate, Ivan? What for?"

"To show I'm clever."

The devils exchanged glances... They chattered away so quickly to each other that it was impossible to make out what they were saying.

"A schizo," one of them muttered. "Or a con man."

"Wouldn't have thought so," another objected. "I think he's intending to go abroad. Is it just the one certificate you need?"

"Yes."

"What sort of a certificate, Ivan? There are an awful lot, you know... There are curriculum vitaes, school-leaving certificates... There are certificates stating that the person in question has what it takes or, alternatively, that he doesn't, there are those that start this is to certify: 'that...', or 'that in so far as', or just plain 'as', or 'that in place of'; there are any number, you see. What exactly was it you were asked for?"

"An intelligence certificate."

"I don't get you... Is that the same as a diploma?"

"No. A certificate."

"But there are hundreds of them, all different. There are some that begin, 'In view of the fact that...', or 'Notwithstanding that', or there are..."

"I'm warning you, you'll get such a bumpy ride from me," said Ivan, "that you'll feel quite green round the gills. Or I'll sing 'Our Father'."

"Calm it, Ivan, calm it," the elegant devil said nervously. "Why stir things up? We can provide you with any certificate, once we know what it is we are looking for. We'll give you one, don't worry."

"I'm not being palmed off with a fake," Ivan said firmly. "What I want is the sort of certificate the Wise Man gives out."

At this all the devils began speaking at once.

"He needs the sort the Wise Man gives out."

"Ough!"

"A fake certificate is not good enough for him... Oh, what an incorruptible soul! Talk about Fra Angelico!"

"Or His Holiness, the metropolitan! So he's going to sing 'Our Father' to us, is he? What about 'I'm eating my heart out behind bars' instead, eh?"

"Shush, devils! Shush!.. What I'd like to know is: how is he going to give us a bumpy ride. He's having us on, that's what! Swindling us! How on earth could a country bumpkin like him take us for a ride, eh?"

More devils came up. Ivan was surrounded now on all sides. The devils jabbered away, gesticulating with their hands.

"He's knocked the brandy over!"

"What insolence! What does he mean by a bumpy ride?.. Is he blackmailing us?"

"Hand him the Golden Eagle goblet*!"

"Give him the once over!"

Things could have turned really nasty for Ivan had he not raised his hand and shouted: "Shush, devils, shush! I've a suggestion to make."

"Quiet, fellows," said the elegant fiend. "A suggestion has been put forward. Let's hear it."

Ivan, the elegant fiend and several of the other devils stepped to one side and began to confer. Ivan muttered something to them in an undertone, eyeing the watchman as he did so. And the devils followed his gaze.

As before, the girl and the musicians were "doing their stuff" in front of the guard: the girl was now singing an ironical song, "Where's the man in you?!" As she sang, she swung her hips about.

"I'm not entirely convinced," said the elegant fiend. "What about it, eh?"

**Golden Eagle goblet*—a goblet which those guilty of infringing etiquette at the assemblies introduced by Peter the Great, had to drain dry.—*Ed.*

"It's worth a try," the other devils spoke up. "It might work."

"Yes, it's worth trying. You never know."

"We'll give it a try," the elegant fiend said to his assistant. "It's just possible it might work. If it does, we'll despatch one of our devils with Ivan who will see to it he gains admittance to the Wise Man. It's virtually impossible to get an appointment with him otherwise."

"No monkey business, mind!" said Ivan. "If I don't get to see the Wise Man, I'll take your devil by the scruff of his neck and..."

"Ivan, shush," the elegant fiend remonstrated. "Keep cool. Everything will be O.K. What do you need, Maestro?" he asked, turning to his assistant.

"Background information on the watchman," the latter replied. "Place of birth, who his parents were etc... And another briefing from Ivan."

"Consult the files," was the elegant fiend's curt advice.

Two of the devils ran off. Meanwhile, the elegant fiend put his arm round Ivan and walked him up and down, talking to him in a low voice.

The devils returned with the required information.

"From Siberia. Of peasant stock," one of them reported.

The elegant fiend, Ivan and the maestro held a brief consultation.

"Yes?" the elegant fiend asked.

"Just the job," Ivan replied. "Or knock me down with a feather!"

"Maestro?"

"Two and a half minutes to go..." the maestro said, consulting his watch.

"Get cracking," said the elegant fiend.

The maestro, together with six devils—three male and three female—sat themselves down a little way off with their instruments and began to practise. When they were ready, the maestro gave a nod of his head, whereupon the six musicians struck up:

Beyond Lake Baikál in the wild steppes,
Beyond wooded hills rich in gold,
A tramp down the road he was trudging
Recalling his youth, his sweet home.

Here we must break off our narrative and immerse ourselves, in so far as is possible, in the world of the song. It was a beautiful world, sincere and nostalgic. Though not very loud, the notes rang true and went straight to the heart. The orgy became a dim memory: the devils, particularly those who were singing, were suddenly transformed into beautiful beings, intelligent and kind, and it appeared that the whole point of life for them lay not in orgies and atrocities, but in something quite different—in love and compassion.

On reaching the shores of the great lake
He got in a fisherman's skiff
And struck up a song, sad and mournful
Of his wretched life full of grief.

My, how they sang! My, oh my, how the little blighters sang! The watchman lent his pike against the gates and stood stock still, listening. His eyes filled with tears. He appeared to be overwhelmed by the song. It could be, he no longer understood where he was or why he was there.

He crossed Lake Baikal at the sundown,
And suddenly his mother he saw.
"Hello, mother dear! Well, hello, dear!
"How's everything? How are you all?"

Going up to the singers, the watchman sat down and, head in hands, began to rock backwards and forwards.

"Hm...m," he said.

And the devils trooped through the empty gateway.

The song flowed out, pulling at the heart-strings, erasing the pettiness and hassle of everyday existence, it conjured up the wide, open spaces, a roving life of freedom.

The devils went on filing through the gates.

The watchman was handed a huge beaker... Without more ado, he drank it dry. Then dashing it to the ground, he dropped his head in his hands and again muttered:

"Hm...m."

"Your father's long dead, my dear laddie,
"You won't ever see him again.

"And brother, he toils in the gold mines.
"A convict, his lot —ball and chain."

The watchman struck his knee with his fist and raised his head, his face was bathed in tears.

And brother, he toils in the gold mines.
*A convict, his lot —ball and chain.**

he repeated in an agonized voice: "Oh, come, give us the 'Kamarinskaya'**! To hell, let the world rip! Give us some wine!"

"Better not, old man, better not," said the crafty Maestro. "Or it will go to your head and you'll forget everything."

"No one orders me around!" the guard roared, giving the Maestro a cuff on the chest. "Watch it, or I'll make you into mincemeat, you smelly old billy-goat, you! I'll give you all a bumpy ride unless you look out!"

"What's the big attraction about bumps, I wonder?" the elegant fiend commented. "First one says he will give us a bumpy ride, then the next one... What sort of bumps do you have in mind, old chap?" he asked the watchman.

"Shush!" said the watchman. "Give us the 'Kamarinskaya'!"

"The 'Kamarinskaya'," shouted the elegant fiend.

"Wine!" roared the watchman.

"Wine," the elegant devil echoed obediently.

"Perhaps he shouldn't?" the cunning Maestro intervened. "He'll feel lousy afterwards."

"Not a bit of it!" the elegant devil raised his voice. "He will feel just fine!"

"You're a real friend!" cried the watchman. "Let me embrace you! Come here!"

"Right!" the elegant devil replied. "You and me are really going to live it up now! We'll give them all a bumpy ride, we will! We'll show them!"

Ivan gazed at the devils who were scurrying round the watchman in astonishment; but it was the elegant fiend's behaviour that surprised him most of all.

"What you playing at, eh?" he asked.

*Translated by Ludmilla Kirzhner.
***"Kamarinskaya"*—a Russian drinking song.—*Ed.*

"Shush!" cried the elegant devil. "Or I'll give you such a bumpy ride that..."

"What?" Ivan said in a threatening tone. And got to his feet. "Who is it you are going to give a bumpy ride to? You say that again and..."

"Who do you think you are, then?" the lanky watchman said to Ivan, also in a threatening tone. "He's my friend, he is. I'll make mincemeat out of you!"

"Mince again," Ivan muttered and paused. "Oh what a mess I'm in!"

"Play the 'Kamarinskaya'!" the elegant devil shouted capriciously. "Ivan will dance it for us. The 'Kamarinskaya', Ivan, come on!"

"Go to hell!" Ivan lost his temper. "Dance it yourself, with your newfound pal!"

"I won't send the devil with you..." said the elegant fiend and he gave Ivan a calculating and malicious look. "See? You'll never get in to the Wise Man on your own, never!"

"You pagan fiend!" Ivan choked with indignation. "What do you mean? Have you no shame? We did a deal. I've such a sin on my conscience having told you how to get through those gates."

"I'm asking for the last time: will you dance or not?"

"Damn fiends!" Ivan groaned. "Oh, it's too bad! Why torment me like this?"

"The 'Kamarinskaya'!" the elegant devil shouted. "If there is one thing I can't stand it's provincial soul-searching!"

The devil-musicians struck up the "Kamarinskaya". And Ivan started dancing, hands down, round in a circle, tapping the ground with his bast sandals as he went. As he danced tears rolled down his cheeks.

"Damn your certificate!" he exclaimed in an angry, bitter voice. "You aren't half costing me dear. So dear, indeed, that it's beyond belief!"

And there at long last was the chancery. Oh, what a chancery it was. A chancery, to beat all chanceries! Had it not been for the devil, Ivan would have been totally lost. The devil was more useful than words can say, in fact. They spent a long time walking up staircases and down corridors until they reached The Wise Man's outer office.

"Just a tick," said the devil, once they'd entered the office. "Wait here... I'll be back right away." And with that he ran off.

Ivan looked round him.

Sitting in the office was a young secretary, quite like the librarian to look at, only the former had a different coloured complexion and was called Mila, while the librarian's name was Galya. Mila, the secretary, was typing something and talking on two telephones at once.

"Oh, what a load of old crap!" she said into one receiver and smiled. "Remember her at the Morgunovs: dressed to kill in that bright, yellow dress, talk about a wheat field! It was only too obvious right from the start..."

Then, immediately switching to the other receiver, she said in a curt voice:

"He's not in. I've no id... Don't you take that sort of tone with me, I'm telling you for the fifth time: he's not in. I don't know."

"What time did you show up there? At eleven? Eleven sharp? Funny... And she was alone? She made a set at you?"

"Listen, I've told you... That sort of tone won't get you anywhere. Don't know."

Ivan remembered how their librarian, when chatting on the telephone to one of her girlfriends and wanting to know whether or not the latter's boss was in, would ask: "Is the beast in his lair?" So he too inquired of Mila:

"When's the beast due in?" whereupon he suddenly felt awfully irritated by Mila for some reason.

Mila gave him a cursory glance.

"Yes?" she asked.

"When's the..."

"What is it you want?"

"I need a certificate..."

"Mondays, Wednesdays, 9 to 11."

"I have to..." Ivan had been about to say that he had to have the certificate before the third cock-crow but, interrupting him, Mila again rattled out:

"Mondays, Wednesdays, from 9 to 11. Are you dumb?"

"What crap," said Ivan and getting up, he sauntered round the office as if he owned it. "You could say compote, even. Or, as our Galya puts it, 'dog's dinner for two', 'a mixture of goat and Gründig'. Now let me ask a question of a more general

nature: are you intending to get married? And I'll answer it myself: yes, you are, of course, you are." Ivan was getting more and more carried away. "But you haven't...—just take a look at yourself—you haven't the slightest spot of colour in your cheeks. Fine bride you'll make! Ask me, the eternal bridegroom, whether or not you take my fancy. Go on, ask me."

"Do I take your fancy, then?"

"No, not in the slightest," Ivan answered, firmly.

Mila burst out laughing and clapped her hands together.

"Go on," she begged. "Say something else, please."

Ivan didn't understand what the something else was he was being asked for.

"Just once more."

"Ah...a," Ivan had got there. "You think that I'm a buffoon. That because I'm called Ivan and wear bast sandals I'm a country bumpkin and as dumb as they come. Right? Well, let me tell you this: I've got more brains than the lot of you... There's more to me, see, I'm closer to the people. I stand for hope, aspirations. What do you stand for? Damn all! Talk about a lot of magpies. You're as empty as... I've got 'depth' to me, see, which is more than can be said for the likes of you. Smaltzy cheek-to-cheeking, is all you ever think about. You talk down to me, think I'm not worth wasting time on. You should see me when I'm angry, I grab hold of my cudgel and..."

Mila subsided into loud laughter again.

"Oh, how comical! Go on."

"It will be the worse for you! I'm warning you! Don't make me lose my temper whatever you do," Ivan cried.

At this point, the devil came dashing back into the office to find Ivan shouting his head off at the girl.

"Tch, tch, tch," the devil muttered, pushing Ivan into a corner. "What's going on? Who gave us permission to speak, eh? Oh, dear me. One can't leave you for a single second. He's read too many forewords, that's his trouble," he added, by way of explanation to the secretary. "You pipe down now, he's due in any minute... I've fixed everything: he'll see us first."

No sooner had the devil finished talking, than a small, white-haired character burst like a tornado into the office—Ivan realized it was the Wise Man himself.

"Rubbish! Rubbish! Rubbish!" he muttered under his

breath as he flew in. "Vasilisa* never went anywhere near the Don."

The devil nodded deferentially.

"Come along in," said the Wise Man, speaking to no one in particular. And disappeared into his office.

"Come on," the devil said, giving Ivan a push. "Only no more of your forewords, mind... Just nod in agreement, right?"

Pacing up and down his office the Wise Man was ranting and raving, as the saying goes.

"Just where did they dig that up from?! I ask you?!" and he raised his hands in horror. "I ask you?!"

"Why you so upset, Mister?" Ivan inquired sympathetically.

The Wise Man came to a stop in front of his visitors, Ivan and the devil.

"Well?" he said sternly and somewhat enigmatically. "So Ivan's been swindled, eh?"

"Why jump to conclusions?" the devil replied shiftily. "As a matter of fact, we've long been meaning to..."

"Come again? What are you up to in the monastery? Your aim?"

"Our aim is to eradicate the primitive," the devil said in a loud voice.

"No good will come of that! You lack the requisite theoretical grounding."

"No, but seriously..." said the devil, smiling at the old man's quaint threat. "It makes one sick. Those cassocks alone cost the earth!"

"What are they to wear then? Your damn monkey-jackets?"

"Why monkey-jackets? No one's asking that. But hand over heart: surely it's obvious they are hopelessly behind the times? It's a question of fashion, you'll say. To which my reply is: yes, fashion! For if, after all, celestial bodies go into orbit round the earth, then they, to put it mildly, fall somewhat short of this goal."

"The issue at stake here, presumably, is not so much

*_Vasilisa_—a Russian fairy-tale heroine.—_Ed._

fashion," the old man said in an agitated, self-important voice, "as of the possibility of extreme devilish tendencies having a positive effect on certain outdated moral norms..."

"That's it!" the devil exclaimed, gazing at the Wise Man with adoring eyes. "Of course: the possibility or likelihood of a positive influence..."

"Every phenomenon," the old man went on, "has two inherent functions: motory and inhibitory. It all boils down to which function—motory or inhibitory—is uppermost at a particular moment in time. Should the external stimulus fall on the motory function, the whole body or phenomenon will jump to life and move forward; should the stimulus fall on the braking or inhibitory function, the so-called phenomenon or body will tense up and retreat into itself." The Wise Man gazed at the devil and at Ivan. "This is something that is not usually understood," he added.

"Why? It would seem to be only too obvious," the devil remarked.

"I never stop emphasizing," the Wise Man went on, "how important it is to take into account the presence of these two functions. Remember the functions! Remember the functions! One might say that every phenomenon has two heads: one saying 'yes' and the other 'no'. "

"I've come across a three-headed phenomenon," Ivan piped up, but no one paid the slightest attention to him.

"Hit one head and it will say 'yes', hit the other, and it will say 'no'." Swiftly raising his arm, the Wise Man aimed an accusatory finger at the devil: "Which did you hit?"

"The one that said 'yes'," the devil answered without flinching.

The old man lowered his arm.

"Proceeding from the inherent potential of the said heads, forming part of the said phenomenon, the head which says 'yes', is the strongest. It is therefore to be expected that the phenomenon or body as a whole will jump to life and move forward. You may go. And—mind you brush up your theory!" The old man again raised a warning finger in the devil's direction. "Neglect it at your peril, I'm warning you! Or you'll get a flea in your ear from me!"

With a brief nod of his head the devil backed, smiling, towards the door. Reaching it, he pushed it open with his backside and, still smiling ingratiatingly, he disappeared.

Whereupon Ivan fell to his knees before the Wise Man.

"Mister," he said, in an imploring voice, "I've got a sin on my conscience: it was me who taught the devils how to enter the monastery."

"Get up, get up. Don't go down on your knees for me, I don't like it," the Wise Man barked.

Ivan got to his feet.

"Well? How did you do it?" the old man asked with a smile.

"I told them to sing a song coming from his, I mean the watchman's, part of the world, see? There they were scampering all round him and he wasn't so much as batting an eyelid, so I says to them: 'Sing a song he knows.' And they did."

"What did they sing?"

" 'Over the wild steppes of Baikal'."

The old man laughed.

"Ah, the rascals!" he exclaimed. "Did they sing well?"

"They sang so sweetly that even I had a lump in my throat by the time they'd finished."

"Can you sing?" the Wise Man suddenly asked.

"Of course. So..."

"And dance?"

"Why do you ask?" Ivan said, warily.

"Listen... I tell you what!" the old man was becoming quite agitated. "We'll go to a certain place I know of. Oh, Ivan! I get so tired, friend, so terribly tired—I'm afraid one day I'll collapse and that will be that. And it won't be from physical exertion that I'll collapse, mind, but from mental pressure: I think too much, that's my trouble."

At this point Mila, the secretary, came in with a note.

"It's reported that the Dzidra volcano is about to erupt," she said.

"Aha!" the old man exclaimed and began pacing up and down his office again. "Are there tremors?"

"There are. Rumbling noises. High temperature in the crater."

"Let's take the analogy of a pregnant woman," said the old man, busily marshalling his thoughts together. "Tremors... Are they present? Yes, they are. Temperature in the crater... What does the general restlessness, excitability of a pregnant woman, her garrulity, amount to—if not to temperature in

the crater? Right? Rumbling noises..." Checking his train of thought, the old man pointed a finger at Mila. "What do we mean by rumble?"

Mila didn't know.

"What does the word 'rumble' mean?" The old man pointed in Ivan's direction.

"Rumble?" Ivan laughed. "It depends. When Ilya Muromets' stomach rumbles, for instance, it's one thing, but when Poor Liza's tummy starts..."

"*Theoria vulgaris*," the old man said, interrupting Ivan. "A rumble is a reverberation in the air."

"You should hear the noise that Ilya makes!" Ivan exclaimed. "The windows don't half shake and all!"

"You'll get a flea in your ear from me, if you don't watch out!" the old man bellowed. Ivan subsided into silence. "A rumble is not only mechanically-produced, it also derives from ... the uterus. There is rumbling which cannot be heard by the human ear."

"But if it can't be heard then..." Ivan couldn't help bursting out again, but the old man fastened him with a severe gaze.

"You're asking for it."

"Please," Ivan pleaded, "I won't any more."

"To continue. All three signs or indications are present. Conclusion? Conclusion: Let the volcano go on erupting." The old man jabbed a finger in his secretary's direction. "Take that down."

Mila, the secretary, did as she was told. Having done which, she left the room.

"I get so tired, you know, Ivan," the old man said, resuming his previous conversation, as if he'd never been interrupted. "So tired, there are times I think: that's it! That's the last set of instructions I'm ever going to append to any document. But then my mood changes, and it's back to the grindstone again. Seven to eight hundred instructions every twenty-four hours. Sometimes I just long to..." the old man gave a lecherous snigger, "sometimes I'm overcome by a longing to nibble at blades of grass, berries ... and the devil knows what!.. You know, I've decided—and that makes eighty-one decisions for today—to take a break. There's someone I know ... a really bewitching creature, by the name of Doefolia, we'll go right round and call on her."

Mila, the secretary, came back in.

"Tim, the Siamese tom-cat, has leapt from a seventh floor window."

"Was he killed?"

"Yes."

The old man gave the matter some thought.

"Take this down," he eventually said. "Timothy, the Siamese tom, had had as much as he could take."

"Is that all?" asked the secretary.

"Yes. What's the instruction total for today?"

"Seven hundred and forty-eight."

"Time for a break."

Mila, the secretary, nodded and went out.

"Time to visit our bewitching lady friend, Ivan!" exclaimed the Wise Man, feeling quite exhilarated by his newfound freedom. "We will make her split her sides laughing! We will, won't we, Ivan? It's not right, I know, it's sinful, very sinful, eh?"

"As you like. Only will we be back by the third cock-crow? I've got ever so far to go still."

"Of course, we will! It's a sin, you say? Agreed, agreed, it is. One shouldn't. There's no doubt about it, eh, it is sinful?"

"I've got something much worse on my conscience... I let the devils into the monastery—that's a real whopper, that is."

The old man relapsed into thought.

"Devils?.. Yes," the old man went on enigmatically. Nothing is as simple as it seems, son. As for that cat, eh? The Siamese. Jumped from the seventh floor! Well, we'd better be going!"

Doefolia was going quietly berserk from boredom.

At first, she just lay where she was... After a time, she began moaning.

"I'm about to hang myself!" she announced.

There were some other young people, boys and girls, present. They were also bored. Wearing bathing suits, they lay in between rubber-plants, tanning themselves under sunray lamps. They found life excruciatingly dull.

"I'm about to hang myself!" Doefolia cried. "I've had enough!"

The young people turned off their transistors.

"Let her," said one of the lads. "Why not?"

"Find her some rope," someone said to him.

The lad went on lying where he was for some time. Eventually he sat up.

"And then—some steps? And after that it will be look for a hook? It will be less effort to give her a punch in the face."

"Don't," the others said. "Let her get on with it—it might even be interesting."

One of the girls got up and brought a rope. Another lad found some steps which he placed under the hook in the ceiling from which the chandelier hung.

"Better take the chandelier down," he was advised.

"Take it down yourself!" he snapped.

The person who'd advised that the chandelier be taken down, got to his feet, climbed up the steps and unhooked it. The young things gradually came to: they now had something to occupy themselves with.

"The rope should be soaped."

"Yes, quite right. Where is a bar of soap?"

They went off in search of soap.

"Found some?"

"Only kitchen soap. Does it matter?"

"What's the difference! Hold the rope steady. It won't break, will it?"

"What's the damage, Alka? (Alka and Doefolia were the same person). What do you weigh?"

"Eighty kilograms."

"It will hold. Smear the soap on."

They soaped the rope, made a loop in it, tying one end to the hook. Then they climbed down the steps.

"All yours, Alka."

Alka-Doefolia languidly got to her feet. Yawning she climbed the steps. She reached the top.

"Last words," someone begged.

"Oh no, anything but that!" the others protested.

"Don't Alka, don't say anything."

"That's all we want!"

"Please, Alka! No last words. It would be better to sing."

"I don't intend to sing or to speak," said Alka.

"Good girl! Go on."

Alka put the loop round her neck and stood on top of the steps.

"Now knock the steps away with your foot."

But Alka suddenly sat down on the steps and began moping again:

"This is boring too!" she said, half moaning, half crying. "Not in the least bit amusing!"

Everyone agreed with her.

"Absolutely."

"Nothing new about it: it's been done dozens of times."

"It's a sign of abnormality, what is more."

"Naturalism."

At this point, the Wise Man and Ivan entered the room.

"You see," the old man said, sniggering and rubbing his hands, "boredom has made them go round the bend. Well, you young things! Everything has been tried, that goes without saying, but there is no cure for boredom. Isn't that so, Doefolia?"

"You promised you'd think of something last time," Doefolia said crossly, from the top of the steps.

"And I have too!" the old man exclaimed. "I promised I would and I did. Ladies and gentlemen, in your search for amusement, so called, you've completely overlooked the common people. The common people don't know what it is to be bored. Why? Because they've always had a good sense of humour, known the value of laughter. There have been moments in history when the common people drove from their land horde upon horde of invaders, and their only weapon was laughter. The fortress is surrounded on all sides. Suddenly a mighty laugh is heard beyond the walls. The enemy is thrown into confusion and retreats. A knowledge of history never comes amiss, dear friends. We are so witty, so intellectual, yet we are totally ignorant of our own history. Isn't that so, Doefolia?"

"Tell us what you've thought of?" said Doefolia.

"What have I thought of? Why, I turned for help to the common people, of course!" the old man said not without a strain of pathos. "They are the salt of the earth, my dear, never forget that. What shall we sing, Ivan?"

"I feel awkward with them all starkers like," said Ivan. "They might at least put some clothes on."

The young people maintained an aloof silence, while the old man sniggered condescendingly to show that he too wasn't much enamoured of Ivan's mediaeval prudishness.

"Ivan, old man, well: it's not really our business, agreed? Our job is to sing and dance. Right? Let's have a balalaika!"

A balalaika was brought.

Ivan took it. He tentatively plucked at the strings, until he had tuned them to his satisfaction. Then he disappeared through the door. Suddenly he flew into the room, whistling and whooping, singing a humorous ditty:

Oh, my dearest one,
Oh, my wobbly jelly-babe
Wobble, wobble, waddle, waddle...

"Oh!" the gay young things and Doefolia groaned, "Don't! Please, Ivan, do stop."

"Hm," said the old man, "no go, as the hucksters say. We'll bring up the reserves. On to your toes, Ivan!"

"Go to the devil!" Ivan said angrily. "Who do you think I am, a Punch and Judy show? You can see for yourself they don't find it funny, nor do I for that matter."

"What about your certificate, eh?" the old man asked in a menacing voice. "No certificate unless you work for it."

"But it's like being thrown to the wolves. How can you, Mister?"

"How can I, you ask? We made a bargain."

"But they aren't amused! Even if they found it the least bit funny, in God's truth, I'd... But like this... It's horribly shaming."

"Stop tormenting him," Doefolia said to the old man.

"Give me my certificate," Ivan was beginning to get edgy. "I've dilly-dallied too long as it is. I won't make it. The first cocks crowed ages ago! The second cocks are just about to strike up, and I have to be back before the third lot start. I've got ever so far to go still."

But the old man had set his heart on amusing the young people. And he, therefore, had recourse to a really low trick—he decided to make Ivan a laughing-stock: so ardent was the old man's desire to please his ladylove, the old sinner. Added to which he was also piqued that, for all his efforts, he'd failed to make this jaded flock of sheep laugh.

"Certificate?" he asked, in an exaggeratedly puzzled voice. "What certificate?"

"I like that!" Ivan exclaimed. "I told you..."

"I've forgotten. Tell me again."

"An intelligence certificate."

"Ah!" said the old man, "I remember now," and doing his best to arouse the young people's interest in the crooked game he was playing he said: "You need a certificate certifying that you are intelligent. I remember. But how can I possibly issue such a certificate, eh?"

"You've got a rubber stamp..."

"True. But how do I know whether you're clever or not? Let's say I give you an intelligence certificate and it turns out you're as dumb as they come. What would that amount to? It would amount to deceit, forgery. I couldn't possibly entertain that. First, you must answer three questions, if you answer them correctly, I'll give you a certificate, but if you fail the test, don't sulk."

"Fire away," Ivan said grumpily. "It's written in all forewords, that I've got brains."

"Forewords... You know who writes them, eh?"

"Is that the first question?"

"No, no. Hang on. That's just in passing. My first question is: what did Adam say when God took one of his ribs and created Eve? What were Adam's exact words?" The old man gave a sly look in the direction of his "enchantress" and the other young people: he was interested to see how they'd react to his bit of fun. He was pretty pleased with it himself. "Well? What did Adam say?"

"It's not a bit amusing," said Doefolia. "Dead dull."

"Amateurish stuff," said the others.

"What nonsense! What did he say? 'You made her, you live with her?' "

The old man smiled obsequiously and jabbed his finger in the direction of the fellow who had quipped the joke.

"Very, very close!"

"I could have put it even more wittily."

"Hold it! Hold it!" the old man said. "It's Ivan's answer we want to hear! Ivan, what did Adam say?"

"Can I ask a question too?" Ivan put in. "Then I'll..."

"No, first answer my question: what was said by..."

"Why not let him ask a question, if he wants to," Doefolia said perversely. "Go on, Ivan."

"But all we will get is ... how much does a sack of oats cost at the market?"

"Go on, Ivan, ask your question! Go on!"

"But this is too childish for words," the old man said in a peeved voice. "Alright then, Ivan, let's have your question!"

"Tell me why you've got an extra rib?" Ivan asked, and, imitating the old man, he jabbed his finger at him.

"Come again?" the old man was taken aback.

"No, no, not 'come again?', but why?" Doefolia said, showing interest. "And why, may I ask, did you conceal it?"

"This looks as if it is going to be fun," said the others, their curiosity also roused. "An extra rib? How bizarre!"

"So that's where he gets his wiseness from!"

"Too rivetting for words!"

"Show it to us, please. Do, please!"

The gay young things stood in a circle round the old man.

"Hold it, hold it," the latter said in a frightened voice. "What are you doing? What is going on? Do you mean to tell me you fell for what that poor fool said?"

They got closer and closer. Someone caught hold of the old man's jacket, someone else was tugging at his trousers. They were determined, jokes apart, to undress him.

"Why conceal such a treasure... I ask you?"

"Hold up his jacket, will you? Hm, it's pretty difficult to feel what's what here!"

"Stop it!" the old man cried and began to resist for all he was worth, but this only made him even more worked up. "Stop it this very minute! It's outrageous! Not a bit funny. There's nothing in the least bit humorous about it! That fool made a joke and they... Ivan, tell them you were only joking!"

"I think I can feel it! His shirt's in the way," said a robust lad who was prodding the old man all over. "He's got a vest on too. Winter vest. White. Synthetic thermowear of some sort... Hold his shirt up."

The Wise Man was stripped of his jacket and trousers. His shirt was taken off too. He was left standing in his warm underwear.

"This is outrageous!" he shouted. "There is no basis for humour here! When is something funny? It's funny when

there is a distortion to the intention or aim, or to the means used to achieve that aim! When there is an obvious deviation from the norm!"

The robust lad tapped him delicately on his protruding stomach.

"What's this, then, if not a deviation?"

"Take your hands off me!" the old man wailed. "Idiots! Are you off your heads? You've got no idea of the true meaning of the word funny! Cretins! Layabouts..."

At this point, they began tickling the old man and he started giggling. He tried to break out of encirclement, but the young bullocks and heifers who surrounded him were packed too tight together to make this possible.

"Why did you conceal the fact you had an extra rib?"

"What rib? What you talking about?! Oh, ha-ha-ha! Where? Ha-ha-ha... Oh, I can't... It's... Ha-ha-ha! It's... Ha-ha-ha!"

"Let him speak."

"Talk about primitive behaviour! Stone Age humour! It's all too silly for words, it was a joke, don't you see? As for your horseplay! Ha-ha-ha! O-oh!" Here the old man farted as old people are apt to do, it wasn't a very loud fart, but it really startled him and he felt horribly flustered and embarrassed. As for the young people, they had hysterics. They were laid out flat, choking with a laughter. Doefolia was rocking dangerously on top of the steps, she wanted to get down, but she was laughing so hard she couldn't move. Ivan climbed up and helped her. He laid her down, still laughing, alongside the rest of them. Then he found the old man's trousers and began to go through the pockets. He found what he wanted: the stamp. And took it.

"I'll leave you to get on with things," he said, "I must be going though."

"Why take the stamp?" the Wise Man asked in a weak voice. "Let me give you a certificate."

"From now on, it's me who will be issuing certificates. To all and sundry." Ivan walked towards the door. "So long."

"That's treachery, Ivan," said the Wise Man. "Foul play."

"Nothing of the sort." Ivan also struck a pose. "Foul play is when you have your teeth bashed in."

"I'll draw up a resolution!" the Wise Man threatened. "I will too, you won't half dance for you supper then!"

"Weak, very weak, Mister!" the young people cried.

"Dear heart," Doefolia called, wringing her hands in a supplicatory gesture, "let's hear it, go on! Feed the flames!"

"Resolution!" the Wise Man declaimed pompously. "The said humour of the above-named collective of fools is declared cretinous! It is both out of place and vulgar and it is therefore deprived of the right of referring to itself by the following substantive, hereuntofore called laughter. Full stop. My party piece, so called, is declared null and void."

Suddenly an impetuous, magical melody struck up... And there was a chorus too. The chorus appeared to be singing and dancing at the same time.

THE DEVILS' SONG

Alleluia, alleluia!
Three, four, open the door!
Luvy-duvy.
Luvy-duvy.
Alleluia! Alleluia!

We'll take a-marching with us
For all obliging souls
A bottle of meths.
A bottle of meths.
Alleluia! Alleluia!

Hi there, folks!
Under the fences,
Under the hedges,
We'll knock it back, and copulate.
Alleluia, alleluia!

Where on earth was such divine singing and dancing coming from? Such exuberance? Eh! It was the devils in the monastery. Having driven the monks out, they were having the time of their lives.

When our Ivan eventually arrived at the monastery it was very late at night: a moon hung low over the forest.

The gates were now guarded by a devil-watchman. Clinging to the fence, the monks were watching the goings-on in the monastery where, as it happened, a rip-roaring, religious procession was underway: the devils were skipping along in single file, singing as they went. And their song could be heard for miles around.

Ivan felt sorry for the monks. But when he got closer he saw they were standing and swaying their shoulders in time to the music, and gently tapping their feet, too. Only a few, mainly elderly monks, were sitting on the ground, grieving and shaking their heads ... but, strangely enough, though they were shaking their heads out of sadness, they were doing so, nonetheless, in time to the music. Ivan stood listening for a while and, before he knew where he was, he too had begun twitching and tapping his feet, as if he'd got an itch.

But now the squealing and psalm-singing in the monastery had died down—evidently, the devils were taking a rest. The monks walked away from the fence. But at this point the monk-watchman suddenly climbed out of the ditch and returned dead-drunk to his post.

"Shoo!" he said to the devil. "What on earth are you doing here?"

The devil-watchman smiled condescendingly.

"Move along, move along, uncle, go and sleep it off. Out of the way, now!"

"What's going on?" asked the monk, quite taken aback. "You've no right to be here! Who sent you?"

"Go and have a nap, then I'll put you right on a thing or two! Be off with you!"

The monk was about to push the devil, when the latter gave him a fairly painful prod with his pike.

"Get lost! They drink themselves silly, then start looking for a fight! You aren't allowed to come so close! See the rules over there: it's forbidden to come within ten metres of the gates."

"Shut your ugly mug!" the monk swore. "You aborted goat, you! Just you wait till I feel in better shape, I'll show you. I'll string you up instead of the rules!"

"Swearing is not allowed, either," the devil said in a stern voice. "You'd better watch out, or I'll give you a taste of the lock-up—you'll be able to swear in there to your heart's con-

tent. He dares call me names and all! You'd best beat it before I... Clear off! You barrel of beer, you! Beat it, do you hear me?"

"Agafangel!" they called to the monk. "Make yourself scarce ... or there will be trouble. Let him be."

A lurching Agafangel went on his way. And as he walked along, he hummed:

Beyond Lake Baikál in the wild steppes,
Beyond wooded hills rich in gold,
A tramp down the road he was trudging...

Sniggering, the devil-watchman shouted after him:

"Agafangel! That's a misnomer, if ever there was one! Agavinus is more like it. Or just plain Vermouth."

"What's wrong, brothers?" asked Ivan, sitting down beside the monks. "Were you driven out?"

"You can say that again," sighed a silver-bearded monk. "You should have seen how we were kicked and shoved! That's how we were driven out."

"Oh, what a misfortune!" another monk intoned in a low voice. "A misfortune to beat all misfortunes: unheard of. Never in all my born days have I seen anything like it."

"We must bear our cross in patience," said a very ancient-looking monk, and he blew his nose with a trembling hand. "We must gird up our spirits and have patience."

"Why?!" Ivan exclaimed. "Why put up with it? We must do something!"

"You're very young," they said, trying to make him see reason. "That's why you protest. Once you're older you'll know better. There's nothing to be done. See how strong they are?"

"It's God's punishment for our sins."

"For our sins, for our sins... We must bear our cross."

"We'll suffer in patience."

Ivan brought his fist down on his knee, really hard, and said bitterly:

"How could I have gone and done that? Talk about a half-wit? It's all my fault, brothers, all my fault. It's me who got you in this fix. It's me who's to blame."

"There, there," they said, trying to calm him down. "My

goodness, what a tizzy you're in. Never mind, never mind, now."

"Oh-h, alack the day," Ivan said in a distraught voice. And he even started crying. "What a lot of sins I've got on my conscience... And all for one certificate! How truly wretched I feel!"

"There, there... Don't torture yourself so, what's the point? What's done can't be undone. You must bear your cross and put up with it, son."

"Go on with you! You must have patience, put up with it, that's all we ever hear! And, what is more, it's all we are capable of."

"But what's to be done? There's nothing for it, now."

At this point the elegant devil came through the gates and addressed the assembled company.

"Hi fellows," he said, "I've got a job for you! Who wants to earn a bit on the side?"

"Well? What is it?" the monks asked, stirring themselves. "What needs doing?"

"You've got portraits hanging up in there ... Several rows of them."

"Icons."

"What?"

"Those are our holy saints, not portraits."

"They need to be redone: they're out of date."

The monks were taken aback.

"And who is to be painted in their place?" asked the oldest of the monks in a quiet voice.

"Us."

At this they all relapsed into silence. And for a long time.

"Holy smoke!" said the old monk. "That's retribution for you."

"Well?" asked the elegant fiend, pushing for an answer. "Are there any takers? The pay is good. You're sitting there twiddling your thumbs, after all."

"Go for them!" one of the monks suddenly shouted. Several of his brethren jumped up and threw themselves at the devil, but the latter ran quickly back through the gates, standing behind the watchman for protection. And within a matter of minutes some other devils, their pikes at the ready, had lined up behind the watchman. The monks came to a stop.

"How uncouth..." the elegant fiend remarked from behind the fence. "So ill-mannered. We'll have to take you in hand... You're nothing but a lot of savages. Country bumpkins. Never mind, we'll soon slap you into shape."

And he disappeared. And no sooner had he done so, than music boomed out again from the heart of the monastery. And a rhythmic clicking of hooves over the cobblestones could be heard—the devils were doing a tap-dance in the monastery square.

Clutching his head in agony, Ivan left.

As he walked through the forest, he was haunted by the cursed music which wrung his heart. Ivan walked along in tears: he felt utterly miserable and conscience-stricken.

He sat down on the same fallen tree-trunk he had sat on before. There he sat lost in thought.

The bear came up and sat down too.

"Well, did you find him?" he asked.

"Yes, I did," Ivan replied. "Better if I hadn't, though."

"Didn't you get your certificate, then?"

Instead of answering, Ivan gave a dismissive wave of his hand, he was too downhearted to talk.

The bear listened to the music in the distance and ... he got there in one.

"They are still dancing then?" he asked.

"And you'll never guess where. In the monastery."

"Oh, mother of God!" said the bear in amazement. "They got in?"

"Yep."

"That's it, then," said the bear and he sounded really gloomy. "We must up sticks. I knew they'd get in, sooner or later."

They were both silent.

"Listen," said the bear, "you know more about town life than I do, what are conditions like in the circus there, eh?"

"Not bad. True, I don't know for sure, but from what I've heard, it's O. K."

"What about the food, I wonder? How many times a day and all that?"

"Blowed if I know. You thinking of signing on at the circus, then?"

"What else can I do? Beggars aren't choosers, so to speak. I'll have to."

"Yes..." Ivan sighed. "Things have come to a pretty pass."

"Are they behaving very outrageously?" asked the bear, lighting a cigarette. "The devils, I mean..."

"They're not going to sit idle, are they?"

"Of course, they aren't. There will be no stopping them now. Pah, I feel as if my soul has been spat upon!" The bear coughed. He coughed and wheezed for a long time. "The next thing will be they'll turn me down—at the circus, I mean. They'll throw me on the scrap heap. My lungs have become like rags. There was a time I could pull out a cork as thick as a pole—it would pop out as easy as anything. Not long ago I went after a cow ... snuffle, snuffle, snuffle... I hadn't even gone a mile and my tongue was hanging out. And there, I dare say, one has to lift weights."

"You have to walk on your hind legs at the circus," said Ivan.

"What for?" The bear was puzzled.

"Surely you know that? It's the ones that walk on their back legs, see, that get fed. Any dog knows that."

"What's the point, though?"

"Couldn't tell you, I'm sure."

The bear sat pondering. He didn't say anything for a long time.

"Fancy," he eventually said.

"You got a family?" Ivan asked.

"You must be joking!" the bear exclaimed bitterly. "I drove them out. Got drunk, became violent, and they all ran away. Haven't the foggiest where they are now." He sat silent again. Then suddenly he got to his feet and bellowed: "Curse them all! I'll get drunk on vodka, pick up a pole and go and lay waste that monastery!"

"Why the monastery?"

"Because they're there!"

"Better not. They won't let you in, anyway."

The bear sat down again and, his paws shaking, he lit himself a cigarette.

"Do you drink?" he asked.

"No."

"You're wrong there," the bear said. "It makes life more bearable... Want me to teach you?"

"No," Ivan said in a firm voice. "I tried it once, it's very bitter."

"What is?"

"Vodka."

The bear let out a deafening guffaw... He gave Ivan a cuff on the shoulder.

"Talk about a child! As innocent as a babe-in-arms, in God's truth. Why not have a go?"

"No." Ivan got up from the tree-trunk. "It's high time I was on my way. So long."

"So long," said the bear.

And they parted, going in different directions.

And it wasn't long before Ivan arrived at Baba Yaga's hut. He was intending to walk right past, when he heard someone calling him:

"Ivan, hey, Ivan! Why you walking past?"

Ivan looked round, but he couldn't see anyone.

"I'm here," the voice came again, "in the lav!"

Ivan saw the outdoor lav and a heavy padlock on the door. The voice was coming from inside it.

"Who's in there?" Ivan asked.

"It's me, Baba Yaga's daughter, with moustaches, remember?"

"Sure I remember. Who locked you in there, then?"

"Let me out, Ivan, there's a dear... The key's under the mat on the porch, go and get it and let me out. Then I'll tell you everything."

Ivan found the key and unlocked the door. Baba Yaga's moustachioed daughter jumped out of the lav, hissing and spitting.

"So that's how they treat wives nowadays! Oh, what a little viper! I'll never forgive you, you've got it coming to you, you have."

"Was it Gorynych cooped you up in there?"

"Yes, the lousy snake! O.K., O.K., smarty pants, I'll get my own back, see if I don't, you skunk!"

"What made him do it?" asked Ivan.

"Search me!.. He's teaching me manners, that's what he says. Throws his weight about as if he's a colonel—then sticks me in the guardhouse. Can't so much as open one's mouth!

Talk about a blockhead!" Baba Yaga's daughter suddenly gave Ivan a quizzical look. "Listen," she said, "what about you and me becoming lovers, eh?"

Ivan was thunderstruck at first but he took a closer look, all the same, at his moustachioed bride-to-be: she had a hairy chin, there was no denying it, all the rest was alright though, and plenty of it, too, bosom and the lot. As for the moustaches ... well, what did they amount to? A dark shadow on the lip. They weren't really moustaches at all, in fact, of course they weren't, just the merest suggestion.

"I'm not sure I understand..." Ivan stopped short. "It's somehow not ... not quite..."

"Ivan, watch it!" Ivan Muromets' voice suddenly rang out. "Watch it!"

"There he goes!" Ivan frowned. "Ivaning me again."

"What?" His bride-to-be hadn't understood; she couldn't hear Ilya's voice: she wasn't meant to. "Anyone would think that women are constantly throwing themselves at you."

"Of course not..." Ivan said. "Why should they? What I meant was ... it's like this, see, it's such a..."

"What you mumbling for? You stand there, tying yourself up in knots. It's either yes or no, as simple as that. I'll soon find someone else."

"What about Baba Yaga?"

"She has flown off on a visit. And Gorynych is at war."

"Alright," Ivan had come to a decision. "I've got half hour to spare. I could do with a bit of fun."

They went into the hut...

Ivan threw off his bast sandals and lay on the bed, taking it easy.

"I'm not half tired," he said. "Oh, how tired I am! Up hill and down dale! What I haven't seen and been through is no one's business!"

"Bit of a change from sitting at home, eh? What do you fancy: a salad or an omelette?"

"Whatever's quickest... It's getting light."

"You'll make it... We'd best have an omlette, since you've been on the road, it's more filling." Baba Yaga's daughter lit a fire on the hearth and put a frying pan on the trivet.

"I'll let it heat up a bit... Come on now, give me a kiss, show us what you're made of." And, throwing herself on top of

Ivan, Baba Yaga's daughter began to get frisky. "Oough, you're not up to much! Why ever did you take your sandals off?"

"Who's not up to much?" said Ivan, stung to the quick. "Me? Just you wait till I get going... Hold my hand! Did you hear me? Go on... Yes, my hand, to stop it shaking. Got it? Now hold the other one! Got them both?"

"Yes! Now what?"

"Let go of them," Ivan bawled.

"Hang on a tic, I expect the frying pan is burning," said Baba Yaga's daughter. "You're a one, you are! Will you give me a baby?"

"Why not?" Ivan said generously, throwing caution to the wind. "Two if you like. Are you up to looking after it, though? Babies are nothing but trouble, believe you me!"

"I'm a dab hand with swaddling clothes," Baba Yaga's daughter boasted. "I'll show you if you like. Let me put the omelette on, then I'll show you."

Ivan laughed.

"Alright," he said.

"You'll see." Having put the omelette on the fire, Baba Yaga's daughter came back to Ivan. "Lie down."

"Why me?"

"Because I'm going to swaddle you. Lie down."

Ivan did as he was told, and Baba Yaga's daughter began to wrap sheets tight round him.

"Ooh, aren't you lovely," she said, "my little baby. Give Mummy a smile, that's a good boy, show us how we can smile then, come on, smiley, smiley."

"Wagh, wagh," Ivan bawled. "Ivan's hungry, Ivan's hungry!"

Baba Yaga's daughter laughed.

"We're hungry, are we? My baby wants his food. Well, we've put your swaddling clothes on, so now it's time to feed my little boy. Smile for Mummy!"

Ivan gave his Mum a smile.

"Tha-at's it." Baba Yaga's daughter went back to the stove.

She'd no sooner gone out than Gorynych's three heads came thrusting through the window—they were right over the bed. They didn't blink an eyelid, as they examined the swaddled Ivan. There was a long silence. Ivan was so frightened, he screwed up his eyes.

"Little one," Gorynych said in a caressing voice. "Little one... Why don't you smile at your Daddy, then? You smiled at your Mummy and you don't want to smile at your Pappy? Come on, now, where's that smile?"

"I'm not in a smiling mood," said Ivan.

"Ah, we've probably... Am I right, little one?"

"I'm afraid so," Ivan admitted.

"Mummy!" Gorynych called. "Come quickly, sonny wants his nappies changed."

Dropping the frying pan, omelette and all, on the floor, Baba Yaga's daughter stood rooted to the spot. She didn't say a word.

"What's got into you? Aren't you pleased to see me? Pappy's come home and you've all got faces as long as a horse." Each of Gorynych's three heads were smiling. "Don't you love your Daddy, then? They don't, evidently, that's the trouble... They despise him. Your Daddy is going to gobble you up, bones and all!" Gorynych was no longer smiling. "Moustaches, kaki messes and all! So we are waxing passionate, eh?!" his three voices boomed out in chorus. "Thought we'd titillate our lust?! Playing games. Well, I'm going to swallow all your puppet show down in one go."

"Gorynych," said Ivan almost in despair, "you know what, I've got a rubber stamp with me. Instead of a certificate, I got hold of a proper rubber stamp. That's really something, that is! So stop shouting, do you hear me? Stop this very minute!" Ivan's voice, probably due to his fear, rose several octaves and became firmer. "Why shout your head off? Nothing better to do? He thinks he's going to gobble us up, see? The seal is over there—take a look at it! In my trousers. Have a look, if you don't believe me! I'll brand you on all three foreheads, you'll be for it, then."

At this Gorynych grinned and fire belched forth from one of his heads, singeing Ivan. Reduced to silence, Ivan added in a low voice:

"Don't play with fire. That's a fool's game."

Baba Yaga's daughter fell on her knees in front of Gorynych.

"Luvy," she said, "don't get me wrong, I was trussing him up for your breakfast, I was. Thought I'd give you a surprise. Gorynych will come flying home, I thinks to myself, and I'll

have a nice, tasty morsel ready for him—beautifully warm, straight from the sheets."

"The little minx!" Ivan exclaimed in astonishment. "And as they gobble me up they will say: it is all for the best, it had to be. What a pair! Pah! Eat me, glutton! Go on, get on with it! A thousand curses on you!"

Gorynych had opened his jaws and was just about to swallow Ivan when who should come tearing like a whirlwind into the hut, but the Cossack from the library.

"You've really landed yourself in it, you son of a bitch?!" he shouted at Ivan. "Fancy letting them swaddle you!"

Startled, Gorynych raised all his three heads at once.

"Just what have we got here?" he hissed.

"Let's go outside to the clearing," said the Cossack, drawing his faithful sabre. "It's a handier place to fight and all." He looked at Ivan again, giving him a reproachful frown. "Talk about a trussed-up chicken. How on earth did you end up like that?"

"My mistake, Cossack..!" Ivan was too ashamed to look the Cossack chieftain in the eye. "Came a cropper... Help me out of a fix, for Christ's sake."

"Don't you fret," said the Cossack. "I've sent worse monsters to their deaths before now. I'll swipe all his heads off in one blow of my sabre. Come on. What's your name? Gorynych? Let's go and settle our squabble. Talk about an ugly mug!"

"I'm in for a really good breakfast today!" Gorynych said. "Three courses and all. Can't wait."

And they went off to fight.

Soon the sound of heavy blows and muffled cries was to be heard coming from the clearing. The battle was a vicious one. The ground shook.

Ivan and Baba Yaga's daughter waited for the outcome.

"Wonder what he meant by three courses?" Baba Yaga's daughter said. "Didn't he believe me, then?"

Ivan remained silent. He was listening to the noise of the fighting.

"He didn't believe me," Baba Yaga's daughter decided. "That means he'll eat me too: I'm going to be pudding."

Ivan didn't say anything.

Baba Yaga's daughter also stayed silent for a while.

"That Cossack!" she exclaimed in a flattering voice. "He isn't half brave! Who do you think will win?"

Ivan didn't say a word.

"I'm on the Cossack's side," she went on. "Whose side are you on?"

"Ough," Ivan groaned. "My heart will give out at this rate."

"You feeling poorly?" Baba Yaga's daughter asked sympathetically. "Let me unswaddle you." And she was about to go up to Ivan and take his swaddling clothes off, when she stopped, having thought better of it: "No, it's early days yet... It's anyone's guess how it will end out there. Best wait."

"Kill me!" Ivan said in a pleading voice. "Plunge a knife into me. I can't stand it any longer."

"Best wait a bit." Baba Yaga's daughter was no fool. "Think before you leap, that's what I says, there's no room for mistakes."

It was dead quiet outside now. Ivan and Baba Yaga's daughter turned pale.

The ataman walked in, staggering.

"That was a right hefty bull," he said. "Took everything I had to get the better of him. Now where's that... Ah, there she is, the little beauty! What are we going to do with you, eh? Send you packing, like your friend, you scum of the earth, you?!"

"Tch, tch, tch," Baba Yaga's daughter said, wagging her finger at him. "These Cossacks are the end! They immediately hold a knife to one's throat. What about finding out first what went on here, eh?"

"As if I didn't know!" The Cossack unswaddled Ivan, then turned back to Baba Yaga's daughter: "What went on here then?"

"He all but raped me! The rogue! I'm going to cuddle you, he says, till you go soft in the head. And I'll pop a bun in the oven too: to spite Gorynych. My, what a hothead—he doesn't half set one off!" And Baba Yaga's daughter gave an immodest snigger: "He's really hot stuff, he is!"

The ataman gazed at Ivan in surprise.

"Ivan..."

"Don't you believe a word of it!" Ivan exclaimed bitterly, then to Baba Yaga's daughter: "You deserve to be killed, if

truth be told, but I'm loth to take another sin on my conscience—it's heavy enough as it is."

"But for all that," Baba Yaga's daughter went on as if she hadn't heard him, "I've never come across anyone with more spunk than you, Cossack."

"So, it's spunk you like, is it?" the Cossack asked waggishly. And he jauntily curled his moustaches.

"Leave off!" Ivan said. "Don't you listen to the viper, or we'll perish."

"No need for that. We'll take her prisoner."

"Let's go, Cossack: there's no time to waste. The cocks are about to crow."

"You go ahead," ordered the Cossack, "I'll soon catch you up. We'll dally here a wee..."

"No," Ivan answered firmly. "I'm not budging an inch without you. What would Ilya say?"

"Hm-m, alright, then," the Cossack sounded disappointed. "We mustn't let Ilya Muromets down, whatever we do. Ta for now, my beauty! My, you've got a moustache and a half, there alright. You and me will really make a go of it, one day. Moustache to moustache!" The Cossack guffawed. "Come on, Ivan. You've got a lot to thank Ilya for, you have, he sensed you were in danger. He warned you, why didn't you listen to him?"

"It's because I'm so hot-blooded, see... I just didn't listen."

Ivan and the Cossack went off.

And Baba Yaga's daughter sat on the bench for a long time, thinking.

"Well, what does that make me then?" she asked herself. And in answer to her own question, she muttered: "I'm neither widow, nor married woman, now. Time to find myself a man."

At the library, Ivan and the Cossack were given a noisy welcome.

"You're alive and kicking, thank God for that."

"Well Ivan, you didn't half scare us! My, how you scared us!"

"Ivan!" Poor Liza called. "Hey, Ivan!"

"Hold your horses, girl, not so much fuss," Ilya said, stopping her. "Let's hear what he has to say, first. Well, Ivan? Did you get the certificate?"

"I got a whole rubber stamp. Here it is," and Ivan produced the stamp.

The rubber stamp was examined at length and with great interest, it was turned this way and that, handed from one person to another. It was passed to Ilya last of all: he also twiddled the stamp for some time between his huge fingers. Then he asked:

"Well? What are we going to do with it?"

No one knew.

"Why send a bloke all that way then?" Ilya asked.

No one could figure that out now, either. Only Poor Liza, fired by her progressive ideas, jumped up and said:

"How can you say that, Uncle Ilya..."

"How can I say that?" Muromets brusquely interrupted her. "I meant exactly what I said: what was the point of sending a bloke all that way? We've got the stamp. What now?"

But even Poor Liza didn't know the answer to that.

"Sit down, Ivan, back to the shelf with you and sit tight," Ilya ordered. "The cocks will be crowing any minute now."

"The likes of us had best not sit, Ilya!" Ivan said, suddenly seeing red for some reason. "We might never get to our feet again!"

"Why on earth not?" Ilya asked. He sounded surprised. "Well, keep on the hop then, if that's the way you prefer it. What's got into you?" Ilya grinned and gave Ivan a careful look. "My, you haven't half changed."

"That's as may be," Ivan's rage hadn't abated. "A changed person and guilty all round. It's alright for you to speak!"

"It's your turn now to sit and brood a bit," Ilya remarked calmly.

"Let's be off to the Volga!" cried the Cossack and with that he tore his cap off his head and threw it on the floor. "Why sit idle?! Make for the fo'c'sle, fellas!"

But he'd no sooner uttered the word "fo'c'sle", than a cock was heard: the third crow had struck.

They jumped back on their shelves and froze.

"My cap!" the ataman cried. "I left it on the floor."

"Quiet!" Ilya ordered. "Don't move! We'll get it afterwards. It's too late now."

A key could be heard turning in the lock... Auntie Masha, the cleaner, appeared. She came in and began to tidy up.

"A cap," she said in surprise, lifting it up. "Mighty fine one too," and staring at the shelves lined with books, she asked: "Whose is it?"

The literary characters sat as quiet as mice... And the ataman did too, behaving for all the world as if the cap didn't belong to him.

Auntie Masha put the cap down on the table and went on with her cleaning.

And here our tale comes to an end.

There may well be another night ... when, perhaps, something else will happen. But that will be another story. This one is finished.

ANDREI BITOV



One of the best known of modern Soviet writers, Bitov (b. 1937) was born in Leningrad and he first appeared in print in 1960. His early works, *The Big Balloon* (1963) and *Such a Long Childhood* (1965) aroused immediate interest with critics. His novel *The Pushkin House*, written in the 60s was not to appear until 1987, when perestroika and glasnost were in full swing.

"I wanted material that was initially positive, alive, that had been endowed with the gift of both feeling and thinking for itself, material that was physically and aesthetically sound, in order to demonstrate how all this may not develop... and run to seed," he says. Bitov, who grew up under Stalin and lived for most of his adult life in the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras, maintains that he reflects the pattern of his age. He denies he is an elitist writer.

INFANTIEV

Nobody knew exactly when Infantiev began working at this research institute, possibly because the knowing of such things came under his jurisdiction. It seemed that he had always worked there. It's strange, but on the whole, during all these years, nobody noticed or remembered him. They said that he did his work well.

They only noticed Infantiev when he became a Head of Department.

It was then, in fact, that they began to form an opinion of the relationship between Infantiev and his wife. After all, she had worked at the institute as well, although a long time ago, just after the war, and for a short time. But there weren't many old workers left: in the last few years people from that generation had been retiring en masse, moreover their mem-

ory was poor. They recalled that she was younger than Infantiev, slim, pretty, dark; and, another silly detail, that she wore gold hooped earrings, like a gipsy. They remembered that she had been cheerful and lively—there was nothing there that you could really find fault with. And nothing much else. Especially as nobody had seen her since that time and nobody knew what she was like now. However, none of us had been getting any younger...

Overall, they regretted that they hadn't been more attentive at the time. Because Infantiev's relationship with his wife was, from the point of view of his colleagues, not a good one. You could get an idea just by listening to him talking to her on the telephone. Firstly, he addressed her in a formal way, calling her Natalya Vladimirovna; secondly, his replies were curt and rude: "What else d'you want? No! No, I'm busy! Yes! Yes!" Thirdly—their relationship just wasn't a good one.

One would like to have known more, but Infantiev was a pretty sullen kind of a character, a loner, who confided in no one. What took place between them, what led to such consequences, one could only guess.

And then, one day, all these guesses became irrelevant. The phone rang on Infantiev's ocean-like desk, Infantiev picked it up unhurriedly, and then suddenly changed completely: "Yes, my dear Natasha... How are you feeling? I'll come right away..." And, saying nothing to anybody, he dashed out of the room. The visitors in his office were alarmed. Multitudinous rumours raced around the institute. And then, suddenly, everybody remembered that lately Infantiev hadn't been at all himself. For the last month—no, for the last two months—no, for the last two and a half months, since we went on that outing... And everybody was amazed that they hadn't guessed before. In the last two and a half months he had often disappeared in the middle of the working day. Others said that Infantiev had always been a secretive person—there was nothing new in this. And a third group said how sorry they felt for him and what a terrible thing it was, although they didn't yet know the nature of this "terrible thing".

That was how it all looked to outsiders.

The "terrible thing" was that Infantiev's wife had breast cancer. It had been diagnosed six months ago. Infantiev understood that it was not only painful and dangerous but

that, for a woman, it was somehow degrading. He was sorry for his wife, and when she returned after the operation he tried to do everything he could to make her forget her ordeal quickly. He thought he should not let her dwell or brood on her illness, and to behave as if nothing had happened. As before his wife was responsible for the housework. And if he saw her sitting idle, her mind far away, her hands in her lap and her eyes looking into space, he would immediately think up something to occupy and distract her. "Sew on that button for me," he would say, for example. There was also here, of course, the desire to preserve the order of many years. However, not everything succeeded precisely as before. For example, Infantiev concealed from his wife that their daughter had left college. He knew how much it meant to his wife. Never before would it have occurred to him to conceal something from his wife just to spare her pain—but this he did. And because of this, and not only because of her youth, the daughter did not really understand the gravity of the situation. Infantiev couldn't understand why it all had to happen at the same time: his wife and his daughter.

But then his wife got so ill that the method of having everything as before and of not letting her brood, ceased to work, and she had to go back into hospital.

There it was discovered that there was nothing they could do for her. And quite soon Infantiev and his daughter went to the hospital to bring Natalya Vladimirovna home. Natalya Vladimirovna would, under no circumstances, agree to be driven home: the smell of cars made her choke and feel sick. This was called "metastases in the lung." So they walked. It was quite far and he and his daughter virtually carried her the whole way, supporting her on each side. It was a bright, frosty day and from the clear, smokey sky light, spare snowflakes fell, one at a time.

Soon she—now addressed as Natasha, dear Natasha—became confined to bed. Every morning the daughter went off somewhere so that her mother would think that she was going to college. While Infantiev—a short, slight man with thin greying hair and bright, empty eyes—would say over the telephone: Natasha, dear Natasha, I'll come right away and would rush off. Of course, it was quite impossible now, there was no way he could not let his wife be aware of her illness, or pre-

tend that everything was the same as before. Natasha, dear Natasha...

They buried her in a beautiful graveyard—the best in the town. It's been like a museum for years, and it's only in exceptional cases that burials take place there now. Infantiev had the right sort of connections. The cemetery overlooked a lake. Pine-trees grew on the high, hilly shore. Graves and more graves dotted the slope amongst the pines. And on the top of the hill was an old church. It was a wonderful cemetery. Far from oppressing you, it created a feeling of life, a kind of sad but light feeling, even perhaps joyous. Most important of all, though the graves were close together they did not shut off the view as they sloped downwards. The slope, the pines, the lake, its far, woody shore—all this one saw before one became aware of the graves. And if there is a clear sky, and sun, and the pines rustle, and clusters of cloud are reflected in the water—then there is no death here. And when the sun sets behind the wood on that far shore, its horizontal rays light up all of the slope, all the graves, the whole of the cemetery, till dusk itself.

When they buried her, there was, a certain kind of weather, but he didn't remember which. He remembered that it was a certain type, but whether it was joyful or sad he couldn't remember.

Generally, when he remembered this day later, it resembled a dotted line or a queue: there were three hyphens in it; three little pictures, three bullets—the rest he had forgotten—three frames from a lost film. And even these three did not fit into his consciousness, but would fragment into pieces and didn't seem to be about him, Infantiev, at all, but about someone else, similar, but not him. These pictures always created a kind of bewilderment in him. They appeared in his mind involuntarily, without warning, always only three and always in this sequence...

To say he felt lost was putting it mildly... "Where's Granny? Where's Granny?" they suddenly started to cry. Infantiev felt that they had all turned to him, were looking at him and demanding an answer from him. "Just a moment, right away..." he said, and ran back down the narrow path, along which their procession had just passed with difficulty, now empty. Infantiev ran along the narrow path, sprinkled with bright, yellow

sand, and the further he got from his family, the more a strange, indistinct excitement overwhelmed him. He was like a small boy, running an errand for the grownups, choking from the responsibility and trust—such a forgotten feeling—and, simultaneously, he was, of course, running from the procession because, obviously what was happening there had nothing to do with him and he couldn't understand why he was taking part in it, why he should participate in the strange movements of people around a long box containing... No, of course not!—containing God knows what. Infantiev was running away.

And suddenly he seemed to stumble and he froze in a position of unsteady equilibrium, bent forward, as he had run, without falling. The procession was moving towards him. Infantiev hurriedly moved off the path and stood in a small ditch, on last year's leaves. He caught a censorious, reproachful look, and looked down. He hadn't run anywhere but had completed a circle and ended up before his own procession. Lifting his eyes, he saw the priest before him who walked in front of everybody with an absurd look that expressed simultaneously vanity and indolence on his broad face. He waved the censor and his walking was somehow inhibited, slower than he would have liked, as if fearing to get too far ahead of that lid which they carried behind him or of the coffin which they carried behind the lid... Infantiev could use the word 'coffin' now because he had realised, with relief, that this was not *his* funeral procession after all, it was another one, he had just had another small mental blackout—it was stupid to have ever thought it. Of course it wasn't his procession—they would never have had a priest... Here some fragments joined up in his mind, he suddenly understood everything and shuffled impatiently as the procession filed past. As soon as it had gone by, he could see the courtyard with the flowerbed in the middle before the old church, whose blue dome could be seen from all over. The doors of the church were open. Infantiev ran across the courtyard and was up the steps in two bounds, the flaps of his coat flying. He ran in and stopped: he could discern nothing in the dark depths of the church after the light outside; his coat flaps subsided, and, as if folding his wings, he quietly crept in further. He had never been inside a church before in his life; he said to himself, "I have never

been inside." With an unconscious gesture he lifted his head and looked up: a dusty light came from there, he could see nothing more. Stumbling, Infantiev remembered that it was proper to lower his head and pull his hands out of his coat pockets. But once his hands were out he didn't know what to do with them. He discerned a small crowd of dark figures, silhouettes, which was gathering around some centre—again it was a coffin. A narrow beam of light cut this shadowy mass in two. "Like a sword," said Infantiev to himself. He was still fidgeting with his hands, now folding them on his stomach, now putting them behind his back, or wiping them secretly on his handkerchief. The people crowded together, falling into that narrow light, seemed to swirl like the dusty light itself. "They have a common grief," thought Infantiev dully. He felt inhibited here and noticed with surprise that all these people seemed much more at ease than he. "They believe, and I don't," said Infantiev to himself, astonished, noticing the lack of that trepidation and silence which he had expected to find here. On the contrary, a humming and a disorder seemed the norm. These people with a common grief seemed, to Infantiev, to behave far too freely. Only one woman was grieving excessively, almost howling—she was old, without a face. Somebody else was blowing their noses loudly; two were talking animatedly, and a corpulent old woman was kneeling down, rustling and fidgeting. They were passing round a kind of a parcel. Waiting for something. Infantiev was suddenly aware of a kind of absurdity, indeed, all these last few days he had been aware of it, but only now did he understand it. It was not really an absurdity but simply that for some reason Infantiev had imagined that people suffer their grief similarly, that there was only one manifestation of deep grief—and this idea was now disintegrating. As he observed this mayhem, the expectation around the coffin (Infantiev had no idea what they were waiting for), this disorder, and, even, impatience, which seemed almost blasphemous to him, while he, a non-believer was overcome by a more tremulous reverence, more trepidation (he still didn't know what to do with his hands) than was apparent on the faces of these believers. Infantiev had forgotten everything, he just stood there wondering—and suddenly he saw Granny. She stood by the coffin, black, indistinguishable from the other old women, her small dry head bent to

one side, slowly and steadily lifting a rolled-up handkerchief to the same eye, and slowly moving her lips. Infantiev strode quickly towards her, the hems of his coat flapping open again, as though he was waving his wings. As he approached "Granny" he skirted round those other dark figures who suddenly froze for him. "Imagine," he repeated to himself with quiet perplexity, "standing by someone else's coffin... Imagine." She stood motionless. "Come out..." he said, and for the first time in his life he called his mother-in-law, "Mother". "It's not right," he said, blushing for some reason, "they're waiting for us." At last Granny recognised him and, flustered, hid her handkerchief ball in her sleeve and started walking sideways, away from the coffin, her gaze lowered, when a man in a surplice emerged, bearing with him, it seemed, a common sigh and a common silence. "The priest ... the father..." Infantiev didn't know what to call him. The low, beautiful voice flowed upwards in the dusty, narrow beam of light. Infantiev was astonished at the people here. The disorder had disappeared, replaced by that same community of grief which Infantiev had naively expected from these people. Yes, and they seemed to lean and to move to one side in common silence. They froze, oriented in the one direction merged now into one. But there was no grief anymore—and this astonished Infantiev.

Then followed the second picture. He stood on the edge of a grave, and was expected to be the first to throw a handful of earth down. Everyone else seemed to have retreated and disappeared, almost they had ceased to exist. He stood on the edge and there was nothing in front of him. But an even light suddenly flooded all around him: the sun had come out. And Infantiev, still motionless on the edge, seemed to hear music. It flowed down on him together with the sunlight, drawn out and slow, endlessly repeating itself, it seemed. Then a light snow fell, and people retreated, scattered away. And this snow together with the sunlight and the drawn-out musical sound, and this kind of immense scattering away from him, as if he were the centre of an explosion, this running away of all others, who were distancing themselves from him into the far, ever-quickening, ever-expanding eternity, like fluff flying in all directions, when you blow on a dandelion... And there he was, still standing on the edge, and before him was a milky

emptiness, and snow and sun coming from somewhere above, and the strange dispersal of faces, turning round behind his back and going far off into eternity. Suddenly, with a damp sound a handful of earth fell on the lid of the coffin. Light, light, light...

And now the third... When Infantiev, pushed and supported by someone, had to go back, apparently home... Natalya Vladimirovna had gone. Infantiev stood at the bottom of the slope, practically by the water's edge. A strip of yellow sand, and the lake. No graves only her little dark hill. And then when he turned round (was turned round) to go back up the slope he caught sight of the neighbouring grave and was astonished. He froze, dumbly, examining it closely. It was enclosed by netting and it had a little roof: it was a cross between a small house and a veranda. In the house there was a beautiful tombstone and a small obelisk at the top of the stone. There was a portrait of a young man with a moustache, with a pleasant, intelligent face on the obelisk. But, according to the stone, he had died when he was fifty-two, so he shouldn't have looked so good. It must have been an earlier photograph. Beside the tombstone was a neat little bench. Everything was very neat. But the most surprising thing of all was that there was a live sparrow on the tombstone, pecking away at a sweet.

For a long time after the funeral Infantiev didn't have the strength to visit his wife's grave. It was only one beautiful day in spring, when the snows had gone, that he went. To find out about the tombstone.

He went by tram, and during the long journey clouds chased across the sky and it got dark. He was already beyond the town limits, soon it would be his stop. Infantiev suddenly noticed the sunlight had turned to dusk. He was surprised that he hadn't noticed it before, and then realised that throughout the whole journey he had been immersed in something, so that now he couldn't remember anything about the journey, nor what he'd seen out the window, or who'd got on at the stops. At the same time he realised that he hadn't really been immersed in anything (what?) that he had not really been thinking. He hadn't been thinking in the accepted meaning of the word. And yet he had been completely lost in thought—hadn't he? Then he remembered. And he became embar-

rassed. He even blushed and looked right and left, as if afraid that somebody might have noticed something about him. But the passengers suspected nothing. There were only three of them, anyway. And the conductor, dozing in the corner. It was really stupid of Infantiev to have looked around. He realised now that there was nothing written on his face.

If it hadn't been for the sudden darkening of the sky, thought Infantiev, I would never have found this out about myself. I would just have got off and forgotten everything that had been taking place in my mind during this long journey. Really... How absurd.

...Such a long journey and, suddenly, Tasha got on the tram, and beyond the windows on both sides of the tram was the sky, (the tram was crawling up the mountain-slope) and pines rustled and she got on, slender, silent. She got on and suddenly he felt terrified. No, she was alive. But precisely because of the sun, the sky, the pines and the tram crawling up the mountain-slope he cries out—but strangely, he remained silent. His mouth was open but no sound came out. She put a finger to her lips and looked at him, came towards him. Silently. None of the other passengers pay her any attention: one was looking out the window, the other was half-asleep. And Tasha was coming towards him and saying: "Well, how are you?" He wanted to say: "Bad, terrible, everything's awful..." "Not bad," he said, "we miss you." "That's good," she said, "that's good." And, strangely, Infantiev felt that everything was normal and real, and that at the same time it couldn't be, that it was impossible, there couldn't be some other world. But on the other hand, it was quite simple and necessary that "there" should exist. "How are things there?" he asked shyly, for some reason in a whisper. "How are things there?" he asked with a rare curiosity and with fear and awe, with a special respect for the person who would know. Now he, Infantiev, would at last know the truth. "What's it like over there?" asked Infantiev. "Look," she said, and pointed to the window. He looked: a blue, blue sky, (the tram was creeping up the mountain-slope). "Yes," he sighed. He turned round and Tasha was gone.

Of course, it was twilight now and that was why he had seen such strange things. But it had also happened before... He would be sitting at home and thinking: Tasha's dying is so

ridiculous that it can't be true. Especially as the funeral and the cemetery—all that had faded, (because it would have been unnatural to have retained it), it had faded, and it was just that Tasha had been gone for a long time. He was sitting at the table and he wouldn't turn round because he suddenly thought: why shouldn't she walk in now, it would be very simple, she would come in and sit beside him and he wouldn't be surprised. And then, suddenly, the bell rang. Infantiev went white and went to the door and opened it, and there was no one there. And it had also happened more than once in his dreams—not very often, but more than once. He would come home and be the only one to see her. Neither his daughter nor his neighbours would see her. And he would discuss everyday things with her, and a rare peace and wisdom would come to him then. Tasha would walk about the rooms talking, but only he would see her, not anybody else. He and Tasha had an agreement, at her request: she would come but he must tell no one, no one at all...

It was silly: sunshine during the journey, clouds on arrival. The cemetery had become more gloomy. Then he realised what an amazing cemetery it was: it really wasn't gloomy despite the clouds. It was simply dusk and the pines were rustling. He went down the steep slope, along the narrow path between the graves, and there he was, on the shore. The lake was strangely peaceful and dark. So smooth, and yet it lapped inexplicably against the even sandbank. Infantiev was surprised that he could look so calmly at the grave. Of course, he must still be in a state of shock of some kind, his eyes would freeze now on one object, now on another. It might also be that he would not believe that Tasha was below this stone. It would really be unnatural to believe that. In fact, it was just a place, a memorial place, a place to come to. That was why it was at all possible to go to a cemetery. Infantiev noticed that there was someone—a woman—at the neighbouring grave, so distinctive with its little house. He was standing like that, more by the lake than by the grave, feeling good, peaceful, not moving or thinking, when thunder crashed over the lake, and rolled over the water, and the first round, single drops formed little grey balls in the sand. Infantiev automatically looked up at the sky. His movement was simple and absurd: where would they come from if not the sky? While he looked

upwards, the rain started to come down faster and he heard somebody calling him. He started and looked at the neighbouring grave. The woman had her face turned towards him and was beckoning to him with her hand, saying: "Come here, come here! You'll get wet." Infantiev came. "I've a roof," she said, "come under here." As soon as he went into the net house the rain started to pour down. Infantiev thanked her and looked around him: a bicycle was leaning against one of the net walls, and big raindrops hammered on its saddle. He was surprised to see a circle of sweets "Teddy in the North", placed on the wide flat tombstone. Infantiev glanced sideways at the woman. But she seemed quite normal: she had a calm, even serene face. She was about the same age as Infantiev. He glanced again, then hid his gaze. "Today's a special day for us," she said. Infantiev began to feel uneasy. It had got quite dark, it was thundering, and the lightning seemed to strike into the black heart of the lake. The whole of the little net house was surrounded by rain, and gusts of water sprayed in through the net, leaving only a little square in the centre dry. What was happening outside was both menacing and exhilarating. And, in addition to all that, here was a strange woman with sweets. Was she quite sane? "What's the occasion?" he asked. "It's Teddy's birthday," she said, indicating the portrait of the man with the moustache and, looking at Infantiev, she began to speak quickly, hurriedly, "He was a polar explorer, that's why bon-bons says: 'Teddy in the North'. I put a big teddy bear on the tombstone, but they stole it—you can see the tracks there. That's when I made the fence, to shut it in. It was such a nice, white teddy bear..."

Just then the sky split over the lake. A hole appeared in it, and the sun sent its rays through it. The clouds still took up most of the sky, and rain lashed and whipped the pines. But everything had been transformed in a strange way. The rain sparkled and dug into the sand, and the sun, like a searchlight, illumined the wet pines; the tombstones shone, and the raindrop-spotted lake glittered. The thunder was moving further away. Infantiev even said:

"How lovely."

"Yes," said the woman, "me and Teddy love this place."

Especially Ted, thought Infantiev and suddenly, tormentingly, blushed.

"Oh, I haven't explained to you," the woman said, as before, "when we first met Teddy told me about an incident that had happened to him once. He had come face to face with a polar bear; he had been crawling on and on, there was a terrible fog, and suddenly he wondered what this wet, warm thing was. Imagine, it was a bear's nose, but the bear didn't do anything to him, just went away. That's why I put a Teddy bear on the tombstone, nose to nose with his picture..."

"Aha," said Infantiev, "I see..."

"Do help yourself," said the woman, "have some sweets, go on."

"Well, thank you..." said Infantiev.

They sat on the bench beside the tombstone. Infantiev chewed a sweet. The hole in the sky widened—now half the sky was clear and everything was sparkling clean. And again Infantiev felt very odd. If before it had been raining, and there was a good reason for him being in this cage, listening to this woman, now there was no rain, and it was inexplicable. And there was a lot he didn't understand in the woman's story. It seemed that she came here almost every day and that she had bought a cycle especially for this. She had wanted a scooter, but was afraid that it would be stolen, especially in the cemetery. So she understood things, she understood that they could steal a scooter. And she understood this was a cemetery. She had erected this memorial, brought sweets, but she herself had said that they had lived apart for many years. He didn't quite understand... Maybe he used to go on expeditions? No, she said it differently. The woman was still pouring out words, and Infantiev felt very awkward: here was a whole life, a history—but what had it got to do with him? Was she quite sane? The rain had stopped. He was chewing sweets, and this also made him feel awkward, but not to eat them and just listen would have been worse. The sweets were very good! Suddenly he thought: how many years is it since I've eaten these? He couldn't remember the last time. He could only remember the sweets from his childhood, and yet he could have eaten them every day... And this woman... In spite of the fact that he felt awkward and wasn't able to follow her words, for some reason he felt that it was very important that he should listen to her jerky speech with words that ran into each other, because what she was talking about was very im-

portant and relevant to him. From the point of view of logical sequence her speech was incomprehensible. But, at the same time, the most important thing, the essence, got through to Infantiev. And he thought that he had listened to a lot of things during his life that was comprehensible without understanding it. Because he had believed comprehension to pertain only to logical speech, one thing following from another. And it was precisely this inconsequential story that he needed now because, flinging logic to the winds, it expressed the essence. Infantiev fidgeted on the bench: what he was thinking, what he perceived just now was too complex, too inexpressible. But perhaps he shouldn't try and formulate what it was, then it would be more accurate.

The woman looked towards Natalya Vladimirovna's grave: "Did your wife take your surname?" she asked thoughtfully.

"Yes," Infantiev confirmed, hesitantly.

"So, your father was a priest!" said the woman delightedly.

"Why?" Infantiev was stunned.

"You're Russian, aren't you?" the woman was gabbling again.

"Yes."

"But the root of your family name," the woman hurried on, not hearing him, "is French, maybe Spanish... Infanta is the daughter of King. But you don't come from Spain—do you?"

"Oh, no," said Infantiev, pleased to have something definite he could hang on to, "definitely not. I was born here."

"And your father?"

"On the Volga," said Infantiev, "near Astrakhan... Wait a minute," he said happily, "it's true, I think he did study in a seminary for a while... But, oh, no," he hesitated, and said angrily, "No, no, you're quite wrong. He was a turner."

"There you are," exulted the woman, "that means your grandfather was a priest."

"No, he wasn't," said Infantiev finally, curtly, "why should he have been?"

"But yes, oh yes! It's fascinating!.." exclaimed the woman. "It was the provincial priests who thought up these strange surnames after all the traditional church surnames derived from Transfiguration, Resurrection, Assumption and Euphany had been all taken... They then thought up less familiar

but beautiful names. For example, I have a friend who is a priest, he's called Phenomenov. And your name is Infantiev."

"Mmm, yes," said Infantiev dumbly, then he managed to contribute, "Like in the circus?"

"Precisely! Precisely! Artistic surnames as well," said the woman, gratified. "What a subtle observation... Usually they're Italian in the circus... Very good. I never thought of that. I'll tell you what's interesting: Monks—an actor's name—but it also comes from the church. Probably the father was a priest and the son an actor. Imagine the drama, the conflict."

"Yes, but my grandfather was not a priest," said Infantiev tightly.

"He was, he was, I assure you. You'll see, somewhere on the Volga he was a village priest, and your great-grandfather, and your great-great-grandfather. And your father was put in the seminary, although, as you say, he didn't finish. Otherwise you couldn't possibly have had such a surname. Or do you insist that you come from a race of strong men?"

"How? I mean, yes, I mean, what do you mean?" said Infantiev, confusedly.

"The circus!" laughed the woman.

Infantiev thrust a sweet into his mouth to shut himself up.

And the woman still rushed on with her torrential speech in which she told how she sped over the whole of the Soviet Union in a taxi when she heard of the death of her husband; how she had had no money and in addition her flat had been burgled, and how she had borrowed money from her friends for the tombstone, and how she had had a son still at school, and how difficult, difficult, difficult it had been, and how much happiness, happiness, happiness, and in the end there was something completely incomprehensible, and crystal clear, but it wasn't something that could be retained that could be remembered—only felt, and maybe one could keep the memory of that feeling...

"Yes," sighed Infantiev, "that's how it goes..."

"My son is grown up now, you know," she said.

Suddenly Infantiev understood how many years must have passed since that time, how long ago everything happened that the woman had talked about, and how amazing it all was now.

The woman seemed to understand Infantiev's thoughts.

"It seems to me that I am communicating with him," she said. "No, it doesn't seem—I am, for a fact."

"Yes," said Infantiev, but still not understanding, and he glanced at her.

"I know your grief is greater than mine," said the woman, "your loss is so recent..."

"Yes," said Infantiev, simply, "it's so empty."

"When I feel bad, I come here and I talk with him. He speaks silently to me, and I feel better."

"I expect you believe in God, don't you?" whispered Infantiev, and glanced warily at the blue dome.

The woman noticed his glance and smiled enigmatically.

"No, no," she said, "and I've never been in there." She also glanced at the dome.

"I have," said Infantiev with a sigh, "by accident. It was strange... But what can you do?.." he muttered, drifting into incoherence. "So, you talk with him?"

"Don't be surprised," said the woman, "you know, I'm a scientist. But what can you call this if not communication?"

"I suppose so," said Infantiev, "I just haven't thought about it yet."

"Especially as he's not there," she said, and indicated the stone.

"What?"

"She's not under your stone, either, you know. It's just a remembrance, a tombstone... And a beautiful place."

"Yes, she's not there," agreed Infantiev.

"Of course they're alive," said the woman, "otherwise how would we talk with them?"

"I never thought of it like that," said Infantiev slowly, impressed.

"He even visits me..."

"You too?" exclaimed Infantiev.

* * *

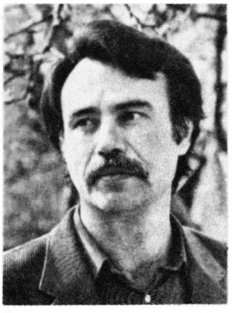
He was on his way back. The tram crept down the mountain-slope. The sky had turned paler and was darkening. The pines stood on the edge and a red sun flashed between them.

"I never thought of it like that," repeated Infantiev. "I wondered what it could be. So this is what it is. Love..."

VLADIMIR MAKANIN

Vladimir Makanin (b. 1937) belongs to the generation of writers who grew up after the war and to whom Soviet literary critics used to refer as "the generation of forty-year-olds". Makanin is a socially perceptive writer. He observes with a keen eye the sort of characters that our age breeds, and introduces them into his prose, as can be seen from the titles of several of his works: "The Anti-Leader", "A Member of the Retinue", "The Citizen Who Runs Away" and others. But Makanin's main hero is his spiritual double, a rebellious, restless character searching for a positive philosophy of life.

Makanin's prose is artistic and imaginative and he makes wide use of all the various literary forms, such as the parable, fantasy and the myth.



VOICES

(*An excerpt from the story*)

There was a strong feeling of guilt about—I'd done something wrong, I understood that much and I was accompanied by three men with flat faces: we were walking across the steppe, we weren't moving very fast; I was under escort. The earth was all cracked from the drought and covered with wormwood and when I stopped (I behaved as if I had not a care in the world and as if I was quite sure they would treat me justly), and bent down to break off a sprig of wormwood, all three would slow down, as if they too had decided to come to a halt. I began whistling. Suddenly I caught a fleeting glimpse of a lark overhead and had it been singing, we would have formed a duet; I whistled, but my escort was silent.

"I'm whistling," I said, catching the gaze of the man with

narrow, slit-shaped eyes, who was walking to the right of me, virtually at my side.

"Eh?"

"I'm whistling," I repeated with a smile. Of the three men escorting me, he appeared to me to be the most sympathetic, his face was less weatherbeaten; there was something youthful, even slightly feminine about it, its lines were very soft. I thought that if I found him sympathetic, it was just possible he might find me sympathetic, too, and that this could give rise, and in fact did give rise, to a certain amount of hope for me. Instead of answering, he flicked a speck of dust off his soft boot, which was as worn and creased as an old concertina, with his whip. His blow caught a grasshopper and it was reduced in a split second to no more than a spludge.

A small, eastern-style, adobe building came into view. It rose up unexpectedly out of the whitish wormwood—utterly alone in the middle of the bare, uninhabited steppe. I was thirsty, but there was no water. Or, to be more accurate, there was very little water. An old man with a wispy, pointed beard, brought them out a shallow cup of water—all three took a few sips, handing the cup round between them. The last one to drink (the chap with the young-looking face), eyeing the remains of the water, appeared to be on the point of handing the cup to me but, hesitating, took another sip then, looking round at the others again (to make sure they didn't criticize him for his kindness), eventually handed the cup in my direction. My hands were chapped from the wind, I seized the cup—there on the bottom was a shimmering drop of water; it had black specks in it and grains of yellow wormwood pollen. I drained it dry. I had to wait a long time for the drop to reach me. And it was at this point, raising my eye over the rim of the cup that covered my face, that I saw the corpse. I hadn't noticed it for some reason when we'd been walking towards the building. It was lying on the sand; squatting beside the corpse, the old man was now keening over the dead body and staring into its face, while my three escorts were lazily digging a grave for it. The old man, who had asked them to help him, was urging them on.

"Have to bury him," he said. And he repeated: "Have to bury him."

The three men dug a hole in the ground, placing dry, cube-

shaped bricks round it: they were making a gravestone of sorts, it looked like a big, toy pyramid that might have been built by children to pass the time.

The old man washed the corpse's face, combing back the hair on its temples. He had a razor in his hand now. As he turned it between his fingers (it glinted in the sunlight), the old man complained in a loud voice to the diggers that the corpse had to be shaved, but that to shave someone who was lying down was very awkward indeed.

"I don't know how to shave someone lying down," the old man remarked.

And he asked:

"Perhaps one of you can?"

He kept on at them, pestering them; he appeared not to notice me. Well, a funeral is a funeral—I behaved as if it was all quite normal and I even attempted to give some advice: I've heard, I said, that in the East the hair doesn't necessarily have to be shaved off, it can be pulled out instead and this is done, I said, with a strong thread: the thread is pulled tight against the face and drawn down the cheek and each hair winds round the thread and is torn out, one by one. They didn't answer, behaving as if they hadn't heard me.

They told me to sit on the ground, my legs outstretched, then they sat the corpse back to back with me; the dead man's wobbly head, was resting on my neck. Since we were sitting back to back, I couldn't see anything (apart from the steppe), but I realized that the old man was going to shave the corpse in that sitting-up position, I could hear him slopping about with the shaving brush in the soapy foam, complaining that there wasn't enough water. Then I heard him scraping off the bristle on the dead man's face. And almost immediately I began feeling cold—the cold entered me in spurts, it was coming from the dead man's back. If it hadn't been for the cold, I would have found the sitting back to back quite comfortable, for after the long journey I was tired and my legs were aching. But I soon began to feel very chilly. A wave of cold suddenly entered my body round about my right shoulder-blade and it was so powerful that I even shook, and the old man told me in a stern voice to keep still or else he'd cut the corpse's cheek. He now adjusted the dead man's head on my left shoulder, he'd probably tipped his head as all barbers do in order to

reach the neck and the tricky places under the chin; I could now feel the corpse's cold ear against my own left ear. I heard the first tentative scrape.

As the old man continued his shaving, I got colder and colder—first my shoulders turned to ice, then the whole of my back, then my arms and only my fingers which I held on my stomach and my legs which were stretched out in front of me, still felt warm; my legs were my only hope, they were still mine. But the cold was now piercing the small of my back with a peculiar, irreversible force, and when the slow, rasping sound stopped and they dragged the corpse away, I, chilled to the marrow, continued to sit in the same position, as if I was a cast iron statue, frigid and inert. I couldn't get up. It was as if I was rooted to the ground in this sitting position, in the way that everything inanimate is rooted to it. They chanted a short prayer. The old man was the only one who didn't pray: he was smartening up the corpse by way of a farewell, shaking the dust off its clothes and picking off the grass heads.

Continuing to pray in a low voice, they dragged the corpse under the pyramid made of cube-shaped bricks, arranged it in place and then continued on their way across the steppe, the old man and my three escorts, while I went on sitting where I was.

They'd gone about twenty steps, when the old man asked them about me, and one of the three answered:

"He's seven eighths a Slav ... One eighth of him may be Scythian."

"An eighth?"

"Perhaps less."

"Not enough," the old man said.

At that the chap with the young-looking face, turned round, as if he meant to shout "so long!" to me, but he didn't, nor did he stop and, continuing to walk at the same pace, he carelessly hurled a small spear in my direction, at a distance of about twenty or twenty-five steps away, and my body made a noise, like the noise a fish makes when, swollen from the heat, a knife is stuck into it: I'd been hit.

I began to topple slowly over from my sitting position, and as I did so, the spear that was lodged in me gradually came upright, until it was sticking up on end, almost vertically, while I now lay on the ground crushing the wormwood. I was still

cold and lay as if dead and this may have been why, in addition to a dull pain, I felt everything that was going on inside me. The spear had entered me on the right side, under the rib cage—it had broken the tissue of the skin, pierced my epithelium, its point penetrating the thick, porridgy mass of my liver then, tearing easily through my flesh, and pushing aside the twisted shapes of my intestines, it had come out the other side of me.

At the point where my liver had been ruptured alien substances penetrated my bloodstream causing septicaemia—and the blood was coagulating through all my vessels now (like the way milk turns sour, only quicker, taking twenty minutes, instead of twenty-four hours), and when my vegetative nervous system switched off, my lungs tensed up in a spasm. From this moment onwards, my cells breathed without carbide metabolism: they were independent now, living entirely on their inner reserves. But the reserves were soon exhausted. And everything came to a stop—and then the wheels started turning again, but this time in reverse: the process of decomposition had started. The aminoacids were re-forming their ranks. They were inhaling air directly now. My cells were absorbing pure oxygen direct, combustion was taking place which, for some ridiculous reason, is known as decay. Every battle is a trial of strength. Somehow I had to survive, i. e., remain in the land of the living and it was for this very reason that the aminoacids were swiftly transforming into grass, the earth, microorganisms, into the air. They were experienced fighters. They weren't going to miss their chance.

Meanwhile, my face had lost its softness; my arm felt as heavy as a log; seized by a convulsion I had pressed it to my face, as if to shield my mother's light-coloured eyes from the vultures—those predatory inhabitants of the steppes were already circling above me. My ego was disintegrating. I had no option but to choose from what was available, my ego cast about inside my decaying body, trying to find a niche for itself somewhere, the choice was limited: I felt as if I had now acquired a long, supple body, and what if this, my new body, was both slippery and cold, things could have been worse and, I repeat, I had to choose from what was available. I crawled between the ribs of the carcase which had once been me, past my smashed-up liver, past the shiny surface of the spear shaft.

I was already quite adept at moving, and soon became used to my new state as, say, a man who's lost his leg, gets used to his condition and doesn't spend the whole of the rest of his life bemoaning the fact that he is legless. I'd lost considerably more, but this was of no consequence now. I was a worm, I was alive and that was already something. I was crawling in order to find the way out, curling myself round a rib, I swung backwards and forwards, absorbing the smells of the grass and the earth. The man who says that a worm likes living in a corpse, is a fool. True, it is often born there, but it soon moves on, in the same way that all mature creatures tend to leave the place where they were born. I swung my whole body and dropped off the rib. I was now sliding quite easily over the ground: I wanted to drink: worms like moisture.

The sun was high overhead; a worm isn't a human being and therefore I immediately sensed where I would find water in the steppe. I heard it, like one hears the sound of an aeroplane, and I moved towards that sound. I didn't have to crawl for very long, because I was going in the right direction. The water wasn't far away: once over the first hillock, the earth smelt beautifully fresh, it was full of vibrations: the water wanted me as much as I wanted it. On I crawled: I stretched out my neck, then pulled in my middle, after which I drew up the bottom half of my body. Following on the wormwood and sand, the first green patches of grass appeared. It wasn't far to go to the water. At this point I saw someone—standing a few centimetres away from me: it was the wretched, tattered old man whom I'd recently seen in my life as a human being, only now though he was still clad in rags, he was no longer wretched. He was huge and he was blocking the way to the water.

"Crawling, are you?" he asked and, right beside me, I could see the soles of his old, patched boots. They were like huge pillars. He took a step forward, crushing half of my body under his boot, as if he was a boulder; he could, of course, have flattened me out in the twinkling of an eyelid, had he so wanted. I began squirming, the boot pressed down on me a little harder, the pain got worse, and I was frightened I would burst under the pressure of the liquid that was building up inside me.

"Well?" was his first question. "Have you sinned?"

"You know the answer to that, so why ask?" I felt like saying, but I had no voice and I couldn't even squeak; I began squirming even harder and more servilely.

He (up there, above me) was probably shaking his head.

"You're sinners," he said in a reproachful voice, "you defile the whole earth."

I began squirming again, answering with the movements of my body: I'm no worse than everyone else, so why am I being called to account?

"Why do you want to live?"

"Everyone wants to live."

"Everyone again... What everyone wants doesn't come into it," the old man said, mimicking me, repeating (in words) the insinuating intonation of my body. "Why do you want to live?"

He crushed me even harder against the ground; my head was going round and round, I'd swollen up and if I burst that would be the end of me.

"What have you done in your life, tell me?"

I have to confess, however shaming, that I began to enumerate (via the squirming movements of my bloated body) various actions I had to my credit. And here I discovered something rather surprising: namely, it is very easy to speak of one's misdeeds, it couldn't be simpler to enumerate one's wormlike, base actions, whether committed one or even ten years ago (one even derives a certain pleasure from the recollection), when, however, I tried to say in what ways I had been good, I found the task was beyond me, it all sounded so trite, so trivial and quite out of place.

I began squirming again; not knowing what to remember and what to say, I mumbled that I was no good at praising myself. We don't go in for patting ourselves on the back, I said, the praise has to come from other people.

"Other people?"

"Yes."

"How do they express their praise?"

"If I am of use to someone, do him a good turn, he will praise me. One must always try and help people."

"Fine life you lead," the old man snorted.

The boot that was crushing me, eased off its pressure. All my body went limp; I started moving, pulling the lower part of

my body along behind me. Still badly shocked, it dragged lifelessly over the ground. The old man, above me, said:

"OK, you can live, I'll let you off for now."

The sun shone down, the water was quite close at hand; I was so overjoyed I'd been granted an additional lease of life, that I became quite bold. I asked why I'd been given a deferment. I repeated my question in the squirming movements of my body:

"Why?"

The old man told me why. He knew everything there was to know about me: going swiftly through my life, he named what, in my view, was a mere trifle. I tensed up from the shock. I couldn't make head or tail of it, for what he had picked out was not to my credit at all, it wasn't a good action, it was, perhaps, more like a weakness on my part.

"But that's true of many people," I squeaked, quite discouraged.

"I let many people off," he answered. And he added:

"You're squirming too much, worm," whereupon he kicked me out of sight. The blow was a strong one but, evidently, fairly well aimed and not entirely devoid of humanity: instead of bursting, my body flexed like a spring, and I flew up into the air. Hurtling over the hillock, I landed with a splash in the ditch of water, towards which I'd been crawling for so long, avidly following the scent.

History doesn't relate by whom or when the drum was invented, it's buried too far back in the past as, for instance, is the invention of the wheel. If the wheel measures distance and space, the drum measures seconds and time.

Though the name of the inventor of the drum hasn't come down to us, we do, however, know that in the Paleolithic Age, there lived a certain savage. There was nothing out of the ordinary about him, he was shaggy-haired and clad, like everyone else, in an animal skin. Even for those days, he was an out-and-out loafer; he was, however, quite bright and ingenious. Bare boulders towered everywhere, as we might expect, and innumerable wild animals roamed round the caves; the animals would howl with hunger for days and nights on end. Times were harsh, the animals bred fast and furiously, and there wasn't enough for them to eat. In those days, gener-

ally speaking, the wild animals pitied the human beings and tried not to eat them, for there were not very many of them and it would have been only too easy to exterminate them.

"God, what a life!" the human beings would sigh in their awful caves. "What a life!" People then, as has always been the case, considered that life was tough, and complained to each other endlessly; they just loved complaining. The outlook became even more black and depressing when a good-for-nothing loafer turned up among the tribesmen, or, as they put it, a parasite, a man who ate without working for his food. He was lazy, shamelessly lazy; though he was young and in the best of health, the loafer didn't even bother to feed his wives, giving them next-to-nothing to eat. Instead he got shot of them. He forced his wives to make an exhibition of themselves: to dance naked in public on weekdays, after which he'd exchanged them for a spear or for a fillet of mammoth. Ending up with only one wife, having bartered away all the rest, he set up house with her in a cave which was filled to overflowing with beautiful spears and shields. He was the first man who began to live openly with one wife. The whole tribe secretly envied him. Though, of course, in public they never stopped criticizing him, and this was not only because it was dead simple to keep one wife in food; it was the principle they were worried about, for he was considered to be a bad, amoral person. Added to which, he was an awful chatterbox and, as is the way with loafers, he was forever boasting. He would boast, for instance, that he was really brainy, cleverer than even the oldest of his kinsfolk. He was warned, time and again, first good-naturedly, then more severely, but nothing would shut him up. In general, though they let him be, out of considerations of humanity; some, indeed, even rather liked him and pitied him. But on one occasion, he really went too far: he said that he'd die a more noble death than all the rest of them put together, he'd die more nobly, that is, than his old relatives, more nobly even than the chief of the tribe himself.

Death in those days was an event imbued with great significance and meaning and the manner of death—whether, for instance, a man laughed at the point of death, or gave himself airs, or cried like a woman—was considered to be a matter of prime importance. Great meaning was attached to a man's last words, and even to their intonations: there was no getting

away from it, an occasion is an occasion. And, therefore, it was both tactless and horribly embarrassing even, when the loafer said out loud:

"I will die a more noble death than the chief of the tribe."

The tribe was deeply shocked. The chief of the tribe answered curtly:

"You will die tomorrow."

The loafer put his hand over his mouth, but it was too late. The skiver's uncles, brothers and fathers (in those days one had several fathers) pleaded for him; but the chief was adamant and wouldn't relent. Order and authority have to be maintained, no matter what: if you don't punish a man for his irresponsible actions, you corrupt him. And other people too, oneself included, incidentally. Added to which, the chief of the tribe was slightly apprehensive that, in view of his boastful words, the loafer might really die a noble death—who could tell!—and people would exaggerate, blow it all up and before one knew where one was a legend would have come into being.

"He's to die tomorrow," the chief of the tribe repeated firmly to the loafer's relatives, who'd come to beg his mercy. And he added: "At sunset."

In those days, those who were condemned to death were made to jump off a cliff onto the rocks below. And they would lie there with multiple fractures, taking two or three days to die, shrieking in agony. In such conditions, there could be no question, of course, of dying nobly. The punishment was harsh: for, on the whole, it wasn't so much death that our savage forebears were afraid of, as the death-agonies.

There was nothing for it, the skiver sat up all night trying to think of a cunning ruse, the last ruse of his life, in order to somehow ensure that his death was an easy one. It is possible that he wouldn't have managed to think up anything, had he not heard a voice from on high; he was in luck. The moon was shining. It was as if the sky above him had expanded, and the minute had become endless, of immense significance, and the condemned man felt liberated and quite at ease. "Dear Lord, you've heard me. You've answered my prayers!" the superstitious savage shouted, and he rejoiced, tears in his eyes, holding up his arms to the moon and to the small cloud that had set round it. He had thought of something.

His idea was basically very simple.

In the middle of the night, he led his one and only wife under the cliff and showed her the spot where he'd fall. It was a full moon. You could see every pebble on the ground. "There, dear," he said, pointing to the hillock that was overgrown with tall ferns, "that's where you must fasten a piece of spear at sunset." "But I'll be seen, they'll chase me away." "No, they won't," he said and smiled.

All the next day, the condemned man did the rounds of his uncles, brothers and fathers, begging them to do him one last favour: he asked that at sunset his fellow tribesmen should gather on the edge of the cliff, armed with flat boards and pots, and that they should hit them, with a regular, steady beat, as he was going to his death. His relatives promised to do as he asked. They were rather sad and sympathetic, after all, it is not every day a man dies. "What's the point of the boards?" they asked and he, in a moment of absent-mindedness and as always putting on airs, answered: "It's a way I've thought of to make death painless." "Will it really help?" "Without doubt!" Sunset was fast approaching.

The sun went down: the sky became bright crimson and then mauve. The tribe gathered in scattered groups round the cliff. They squatted on the ground, they watched, they banged on their boards. The savage walked for the last time. As he moved towards the edge of the cliff, the first drums in the history of mankind thundered out. The savage didn't hurry, he moved slowly forwards. The drumming, of course, like all original inventions, was far from perfect—his fellow tribesmen hit whatever they'd managed to get hold of, often out of beat and getting in each other's way; there was certainly room for improvement. The ears and eyes of the crowd were diverted by, or, to be more accurate, attracted by the idiotic din and to the loafer's absurd, proud walk. In the meantime, his wife had fastened a piece of spear among the ferns under the cliff. The savage leapt over the edge of the cliff, landing just in the right place. And he died quickly. He only just had time to cry out exultantly: "It's not a bit painful!" before the sun popped over the horizon, and this in fact was why he'd walked so slowly towards the edge of the cliff. It got dark. The birds grew silent. The wife, now a widow, drew out the spear and returned unnoticed to her cave, so that their ruse

wouldn't be discovered and she wouldn't be punished—this was what they'd agreed between them.

Everyone was surprised, the tribe was agog with excitement: for usually the cries of the dying were to be heard for a night and a day and then another night. The next morning, the chief of the tribe, despite his breathlessness, climbed down himself to the foot of the cliff to have a look, for every man, woman and child in the tribe were already whispering that the death had been an easy one, courageously borne and that there had been a smile on the face of the condemned man and that his teeth hadn't been clenched.

Within a year, or it may have been three (the exact number of years hasn't been recorded by history) or perhaps ten, the time came for the chief of the tribe to die. And the dying man, lying in bed and wracked by pain, ordered that the tribesmen should again gather together, armed with flat boards and with animal skins that had been stretched taut to dry. And, that, as before, they should beat on them with sticks. And he, dying from his old wounds, would lie, listening to them, and give up the ghost. Such was his will. "But chief," the elders of the tribe said to him, "that will remind the tribe's people of the good-for-nothing loafer. They'll assume you held him in respect."

"Well, so what. He wasn't stupid. Everyone knows that."

"But it amounts to plagiarism. It will look as if he really did die a more noble death than you did."

"I'm not vain," the chief of the tribe answered sternly, "I don't mind taking second place." Having said which, he clenched his teeth with pain and shut his eyes for a second. "I'm not vain, you know. And the beating of drums is so soothing on the ear. There is something very appealing about it."

Though the chief of the tribe was a brave man, he too wanted to die an easy death; he wanted to avoid suffering, and this soon became general knowledge; and the people remembered this and took it to heart, as is their wont. The next chieftain also expressed a wish to die to the sound of drumming. And after this, the most eminent of the elders did too. And, as is often the case with innovations, it gradually became habitual practice: the condemned to death were among the first to ask that their sentence be carried out to the beating of drums, and their fellow tribesmen could not but grant them

their last wish. To die to the beating of drums became customary. And so a man died and a tradition was born.

During the Crusades, the Christian knights took over the practice of drumming from the Moslems—thus the custom was introduced into Europe from the East. The drum appeared in Russia during the reign of Ivan III, on the eve of Ivan the Terrible's ascent to the throne.

In time the drum was to lose its tragic overtones: and the condemned were no longer to hear it, as they walked to their death. Soldiers, going into attack, however, continued to keep their spirits up by the beating of drums for some time to come. But, eventually, even this custom died out.

The drum was then introduced into the orchestra and it became known as the Turkish drum, but its role here was always a minor one and strictly limited. Today the drum has come into its own again in pop groups where it has taken on a new lease of life—in the hands of dashing, young drummers.

And, of course, it still has a role to play as a toy. Children love drums.

...I was long haunted by the following scene: three physically strong and cold-blooded men were killing or torturing a victim and I was watching them, standing to one side, and because of this I felt horribly ashamed of myself. "Don't worry, we won't hurt you!" the three men shouted, and I smiled pathetically and shuffled my feet, paralyzed by fear and the horror of it. Nothing remotely similar had ever happened to me, nor did I have anything of the sort on my conscience.

However, over and over again, with the persistence of a revengeful spirit, roughly about once in every six to twelve months, so that I would have time to forget and, therefore, to be reminded of it would be all the more painful, I would be overcome by angst. Sometimes in the shape of a scene. Sometimes in the shape of a disturbing emotion. Sometimes there'd be details. But it would always be accompanied by a feeling of repentance and guilt for my shameful weakness and for my failure to intervene. It might well have been one of my ancestors who, overcome by cowardice in a similar situation, hadn't interfered, smiling pathetically and standing to one side, but which one of them, and when? How was I to know? The voice of conscience had probably hounded my ancestor right up till

his death. And weaker, and then weaker still, it had haunted my grandfather and my father. It was the male line the voice haunted, that was natural. And now, very faintly and only from time to time, it persecuted me, it was not so much a question of persecution, as of reminding me of its existence, perhaps: an avenger who was on his way out.

In one of the smaller Eastern countries, two Buddhist-brothers cut off their mother's head. And they did it with her consent; this took place in 1962.

The idea was as follows: during the holy service, the Buddhist-brothers had been robbed of, let's say, one hundred rupees. The thief had got away and no one knew who it was. But now the spirit of their dead mother would persecute the thief for the rest of his infamous life. It would prevent the thief stealing again, help his enemies and those trying to catch him, and every night it would torture him with nightmares.

It was only when I'd got over the tragic nature of this event—I have in mind the beheading and not the theft of one hundred rupees—and managed to look on what had happened with a certain amount of calm (the incident, after all, was fairly remote if one thinks in geographical terms and alien), that I understood and appreciated the idea in its full force. And I realized how much easier it made life for the Buddhist-brothers. And how it would lend added dignity and honour to their prayers and service of God. And I understood and could even visualize them, kneeling on their prayer mats, hands held to their faces. I have to confess, I also saw the old woman; about two hours or so before she'd been beheaded (I imagined how she would have looked at this minute in time), the old woman was laughing maliciously, rubbing her hands, in anticipation of having her head cut off and of how soon, very soon now, she'd be able to start tormenting her victim. It is known, that she had let her nails grow for this very purpose. The old woman was over the moon, she couldn't wait to get down to work.

If one's memories, extended moments in time, are indeed compensation for what one has lost, why may one not consider such brief outpourings of the soul to be the voices of people dead long ago which, descending the family

tree—from great-grandfather and great-grandmother, to grandfather, to mother, to son, arrive eventually at oneself and fill one to bursting point with their genetic mumbling. Imagine a fire hose, a long and hermetically sealed canvas tube, in which, in one place only—in yourself—there happens to be a small hole, in other words an exit. And, as the pressure of the infinite mass of water in the tube builds up as it passes through the tiny opening—that is to say through yourself—a thin jet of water gushes forth like a fountain, and sometimes the jet is a fairly powerful one, and one can put one's mouth to it and drink. It's a picture that has its attractive points: a whole chain of tongueless forebears who haven't had their say, prompt you, whisper to you, lamenting the fact that you are so deaf and can hear so little.

The hills, the valleys, and the woods
And your sweet gaze have gone
But why is it that I still hear
Your voices far away?

And indeed, a man sings, as it were, in retrospect. He sings about what he has lost. With age, he has learnt to appreciate the woods, the hills, and sweet gazes, but he no longer hears his voices. His youth and childhood are far behind him and in the day-to-day hustle his voices are indistinguishable. It is as difficult to make them out, as it is to pick out a tune that suddenly catches one's ear on a transistor wireless whose batteries have run down. And to gather together, even scraps of one's voices, even echoes of them, appears to be too complex and disturbing a task for one's years.

People die in different ways, the young, it is said, have an easy death. It is quite possible that someone who dies in his youth hears all his voices at once which, had he not died early, would have disturbed him by degrees throughout his life. The man who dies young then, hears all the voices that are allotted to him in one go and presumably this must be a really sweet moment. And, romantic considerations apart, it can, perhaps, be stated, that someone dying before his time has a certain compensation: for he hears all his voices and he departs this life with them, keeping hold of them, knowing now at any rate

why he'd come into the world. A voice requires improvisation, instantaneous improvisation, what is more. But where is one to find this if, instead of being a singing angel blazing a trail across the heavens, one is worn down by life and age, provided, of course, that by improvisation we don't mean a set vocabulary of stock words and expressions which may be taken out of the pocket or not, at will.

CHINGHIZ AITMATOV

Chinghiz Aitmatov, (b. 1928), the Kirghiz prose writer, is also a major public figure well-known both at home and abroad, Editor-in-Chief of *Inostrannaya literatura* (Foreign Literature), a journal which publishes contemporary foreign fiction in translation.



Aitmatov's prose is a beautiful blending of the Russian classical tradition and the extraordinarily vivid, poetical world of the myth and the legend typical of Kirghiz folklore. Many of his works have become known to the English-reading public through excellent translations done by Raduga Publishers in Moscow.

Concern is the leitmotif of Aitmatov's latest novel, *The Block*: concern about the cynicism of consumerism, the decline of social morals, concern about growing alcoholism, drug addiction, crime. Aitmatov himself defines the theme of his novel as "a search for God".

STORMY HALT

(An excerpt from the novel)

In the Pacific Ocean, in its northern latitudes, it was already morning, almost eight o'clock in the morning. The blinding sun poured its endless light over the huge and immensely glittering calm of the water. And apart from the sea and the sky there was nothing at all in this region, nothing except the aircraft carrier *Convention*, stationed to monitor the work of the joint Soviet-American orbital space station *Parity*.

The aircraft carrier *Convention*, the joint Control Centre of the planet-research programme *Demiurge*, now broke off all contact with the outside world and held its position to the south of the Aleutian Islands; indeed, it checked and rechecked its position, and remained exactly equidistant from Vladivostok and San Francisco.

On the ship itself a number of minor changes might have been noticed. On the orders of the joint programme heads, one American and one Soviet, the two communications officers (also one American and one Soviet), who were in contact with the *Parity*, were temporarily but strictly isolated from the rest of the ship's complement, in order to avoid any leak about what had happened on the orbital space station.

Also, a general state of alert was introduced on the *Convention*, although the ship had neither a military purpose nor even any weapons on board; by a special resolution of the UN it had been granted total international immunity. It was the only non-military aircraft carrier in the world.

At eleven o'clock and five past eleven, respectively, high-level commissions were expected from San Francisco and Vladivostok, and the joint commission thus formed was to have unconditional powers to take any emergency decisions and practical measures necessary for the safety of their respective countries and for the world as a whole...

The *Demiurge* programme had been dealing with one of the greatest tasks in space-research history, the study of the planet X with a view to using its mineral resources, from which an almost limitless amount of energy could be produced. The decisive factor in favour of the project was the fact that on no other planet known to science was there such a quantity of natural water as was present below the apparently barren surface of X. According to scientists, there was a layer of water under the planet's surface, probably several kilometres deep, held in its fixed state by the cold, solid rock beneath it...

The collection and analysis of water from X was to be the first example of industrial activity by man beyond the boundaries of his planet. And the great day was approaching: the final preparations for hydrological operations on X were being made at the space centres in Sarozek and Nevada. The *Parity* was in orbit around the planet X, and was ready to receive the first group of hydrotechnologists and to send them down to the planet's surface. Mankind was on the threshold of its extraterrestrial civilisation...

And it was at this moment, when the first group of hydrotechnologists was ready to be launched from the Earth to the orbital space station, that the two *Parity* astronauts had disappeared without trace...

After more than three months in space the two men had simply stopped answering any signals from Earth, either at the predetermined communication times or at any other time. Apart from the automatic sensors which constantly registered and signalled the station's position, all the systems of radio and television communication had ceased to function.

Time passed, and the *Parity* continued silent. The alarm on board the *Convention* grew as various conjectures and suggestions were made as to what had become of the astronauts.

It was decided to activate, from on board the *Convention*, the space station's general fire alarm system. But this, too, drew no response from the *Parity*.

A serious danger now threatened the *Demiurge* research programme, and the *Demiurge* Control Centre on the *Convention* took its only remaining option: to clarify the position on board the *Parity* two further astronauts were sent—one from Nevada, one from Sarozek—to link up with the space station. The first reaction of these inspection astronauts, after they had searched the *Parity*, was one of shock. They reported to the *Convention* that, having checked all the compartments, all the laboratories and all works and corners on all levels, they could find no trace of the *Parity* astronauts—neither alive, nor dead...

This was totally unexpected. No one could imagine how this could have happened, or where the two men, having carried out all the tasks expected of them for a period of over three months, could have disappeared to. They couldn't have vanished into thin air! And they couldn't have gone outside the space station, into the endless vacuum of space!

The search in the *Parity* space station was carried out in direct radio and television contact with the joint programme heads on board the *Convention*. The inspection astronauts were clearly visible on the many screens of the Control Centre as they floated around in weightlessness, checking the whole station block, room by room. As they searched they constantly reported what they saw, and their report was recorded on tape. The final part of the dialogue with the *Convention* was as follows:

Parity. As you can see, there's no one on the station. We can find nobody.

Convention. Are there any traces of breakages or damage on the station?

Parity. No. Everything looks like it should, everything's in order. There's nothing out of place.

Convention. Have you seen any traces of blood?

Parity. None whatsoever.

Convention. Where, and in what state, are the astronauts' personal belongings?

Parity. They seem to be all here.

Convention. But?

Parity. We have the impression the astronauts were here not so long ago. Their books, watches and things are all here.

Convention. Fine. But is there no note or message, maybe on a wall or on a loose bit of paper somewhere?

Parity. We've not specifically looked, but wait a moment, the logbook's open at a page here...

Convention. What does it say? Read it out.

Parity. Just a moment. It's two texts, written out side by side, one in English, one in Russian...

Convention. Come on, read it out!

Parity. There's a heading. "A message to the Earth", and then in brackets—"explanatory note".

Convention. Stop! Don't read any more. Just stay where you are, and wait. We shall contact you again shortly. Be ready.

Parity. OK.

At this point the conversation between the orbital station and the Control Centre was halted, while the joint programme heads asked everyone except the two communication officers to leave the communications block. When contact with the *Parity* was resumed, the inspection astronauts transmitted the "explanatory note" left by the *Parity* astronauts:

"Dear colleagues. Since we are leaving the *Parity* orbital station under extremely unusual circumstances and for an indefinite period, perhaps for a very long time, we consider it our bounden duty to explain the motives for our action.

"We fully realise that our action may undoubtedly seem not only unexpected, but even unacceptable from the point of view of elementary discipline. But the exceptional fact which we have met with here in outer space is something for which

we can find no equal in the history of human civilisation, and in this regard we feel that we can count on understanding, at the very least.

"Some time ago, among the innumerable radio-wave impulses coming from all around us, including the various noises and interference from our own Earth's ionosphere, we picked up a directional radio signal in the high frequency range; we picked it out easily, because it was the highest frequency of all and because of its unremitting regularity. At first we paid little attention to this signal, but it continued to arrive, always from exactly the same point in the universe, always—apparently—aimed directly at our space station. Now we know for certain that these directed radio waves existed even before we came on board the *Parity*. And we wonder why we were the first of the six men engaged on the station to become interested in them. However that may be, we began to observe, pin-point and study the nature of this phenomenon, and we gradually came to the conclusion that the signals were artificial in origin.

"But it was a long time before we grew accustomed to this idea, and our doubts lingered. How could we assert the existence of extraterrestrial life, based solely on apparently artificial radiosignals from the unexplored depths of outer space? All the more so that all previous attempts to detect even the slightest semblance of life, in whatever form, outside the bounds of our own Earth had proved to be totally fruitless. Extraterrestrial intelligence was felt to be highly improbable, and searching for it, an utopian activity; and with every new step in the research of outer space the chances of finding life there, even theoretically, became ever smaller, almost nil. We did not venture to report our conjectures with regard to this signal: we were not prepared to refute the universally held idea that living creatures on the Earth were a unique and unprecedented biological phenomenon. Nor did we consider ourselves obliged to share our doubts in this matter, since observations of this kind were not part of our programme of work on the orbital station.

"One day, out of curiosity, we decided to send an answer to the point in the universe from where we were receiving the mysterious radio impulses, and we sent our answer in approximately the same frequency range. *And miracle of miracles!*

Our signal was received straight away, received and understood! On our reception frequency we began to get a second impulse alongside the first, and then there was a third: three synchronised radio signals from the depths of outer space, lasting several hours, like a triumphal march, carrying with it the joyful news that intelligent beings existed outside our galaxy and could make contact, over long distance, with creatures similar to themselves. This was a revolution in our conceptions of biology, time, space and distance. Could it be that we were not alone in the universe, not the only form of life in the unimaginably empty infinity of space?

"To check the discovery of this extraterrestrial civilisation, we sent a radio signal giving the formula of the mass of our planet. In answer we received a signal, in turn, with a similar formula for the mass of their planet. On the basis of this we concluded that they lived on a fairly large planet with a considerable gravitational force.

"Thus, with an exchange of basic laws of physics, began mankind's first contact with extraterrestrial intelligent life.

"The dwellers of this other planet were very desirous of furthering our contacts. At first we were able to exchange our thoughts by means of mathematical and chemical formulae, but then they let us know that they could also talk to us. It seems that for many years—since man overcame the Earth's gravity and began to dwell for long periods in outer space—they have been learning our languages, using powerful auditory devices with which they can detect and distinguish sound waves far away in the galaxy. Listening in to the constant transmissions between the Earth and its artificial satellites, they could compare and analyse the meanings of our words, and phrases. We can vouch for how much they have achieved in this, since they now communicate with us in both English and Russian.

"And now for the most important thing: we have decided to visit the planet of this extraterrestrial civilisation, a planet which they call Mother Forest. The Foresters—as they call themselves—invited us, it was their idea. But we made our decision to go only after mature reflection. They explained that their spacecraft travel with the speed of light, and could reach us in twenty-six or twenty-seven hours. They have also promised to return us here no less quickly, as soon as we so

wish. When we asked about the link-up with their spacecraft, they explained that it was no problem, as their craft was capable of forming a hermetic seal with any object of any configuration and construction. We understand the seal is based on the use of electromagnetic attraction. We shall return the way we are going if, of course, our journey to the planet Mother Forest has a successful outcome.

"Thus we are leaving our message, our open letter on board the *Parity*. We fully realise what we are doing, and the extent of the responsibility which we are taking on. We are also aware that it is the will of blind fate that we are the ones to have been given this most unique of opportunities to do such a service to mankind, the like of which we are unable even to imagine.

"And yet the hardest thing for us to overcome was our sense of duty, obligation and discipline. We are leaving the *Parity* without telling you, the programme heads, the Control Centre, or indeed anyone at all in the world; but we have avoided talking over our aims and tasks not simply in an attempt to ignore the rules accepted on Earth. We feel that we have to 'go it alone' in this way, because we can well imagine the passions and contradictions which would flare up among those who see a political victory and the advantage of their own political system even in such a simple thing as an extra goal in an international ice-hockey match. Alas, we know our Earth's reality only too well! Who could guarantee that contact with this extra-terrestrial civilisation would not become just yet another excuse for international strife on Earth?

"While on Earth it is difficult, if not impossible, to keep apart from the political struggle. But, having been up here in outer space for so many days and weeks and seeing the Earth as no larger than the wheel of an ordinary motor-car, it is with pain and sadness that we realise that the current energy crisis (which is leading society to frenzy and desperation, and causing certain countries to reach out for the atom bomb) would be nothing more than a large technical problem if all these countries could agree on what is most important.

"And finally. In our reflections and doubts we have been greatly concerned to do nothing to the detriment of the *Demiurge* programme, this magnificent beginning to man's development of outer space, a beginning achieved after long

years of mutual distrust, after endless ebbings and flowings of co-operation. And yet reason triumphed, and we have served our common cause diligently and to the full extent of our powers and abilities. But, having weighed up the pros and cons, and without wishing to cause the *Demiurge* programme any difficulties, we have made our decision and shall leave the *Parity* temporarily in order to return with a report of our visit to the planet Mother Forest. If we should disappear without trace, or if the programme heads consider us unworthy to continue our work on the *Parity*, then it will not be too difficult to replace us. There are any number of young men waiting in the wings who will do the work no worse than us.

"We are going into the unknown. We are led by a thirst for knowledge and by man's ancient dream of discovering other intelligent life in the universe in order to join reason with reason. But no one can tell whether this extraterrestrial civilisation promises good or evil for mankind. We shall try to be objective in our assessments, and if we sense that our discovery contains any threat or potential danger to our Earth, then we swear to act in a way which will draw down no misfortune on the Earth.

"We take our leave. We can see the Earth through our portholes; it is glowing like a radiant diamond in the black sea of space. The Earth is an incredibly beautiful blue, and from here it seems so fragile, like a new-born baby's head. From here it seems that all people living on Earth are our brothers and sisters, and we dare not even think of ourselves apart from them; although we know that things are very different on the Earth itself.

"We take our leave of our world. In a few hours we shall leave the *Parity*, and we shall lose sight of the Earth. The Foresters are already on their way, and are now not far from us. Soon they will arrive, very soon. There is little time left.

"We are leaving letters for our families. We sincerely beg all of you connected with this matter to see that the letters are delivered safely.

"PS. For the benefit of those who come to the *Parity* after us, we have made a note in the log-book of the wave-lengths we used in our contacts with the Foresters. We shall contact you on these wave-lengths as necessary. It appears that the only means of contact with the Foresters is through the orbital

station's radio system, since radio signals directed to the Earth from their own planet are unable to penetrate the Earth's powerful ionosphere.

"Farewell. It is time for us to go.

"We have written identical texts in Russian and English.

Parity astronaut 1-2
On board the Parity orbital station.
Third watch. 94th day."

At eleven o'clock and five minutes past eleven, respectively, jet planes coming from San Francisco and Vladivostok landed on the flight deck of the aircraft carrier *Convention*. Each plane brought its high-level commission, with full powers to take any decisions and measures felt to be necessary.

The commission members were greeted according to protocol, were given exactly half an hour for lunch, and were to meet in private session immediately after lunch to discuss the exceptional situation on the *Parity* orbital station.

But the meeting between the two commissions had hardly begun, before it was suddenly interrupted. The inspection astronauts on the *Parity* relayed to the *Convention* the first report received from the *Parity* astronauts on the planet Mother Forest.

* * *

The aircraft carrier *Convention* at this time was still in position, in the northern latitudes of the Pacific Ocean, to the south of the Aleutian Islands, exactly equidistant from Vladivostok and San Francisco.

The weather over the ocean had not changed. During the morning the sun continued to pour its blinding light over the endless glitter of the wide water. And there was nothing on the horizon to foretell of any atmospheric changes.

On the aircraft carrier itself all personnel were on stand-by, on full alert, including even the air wing and the internal security group, although there were no obvious reasons for this. The reasons, however, were to be found far beyond the Earth, in a totally different part of the universe.

The report from the *Parity* astronauts on the planet Mother Forest, passed down to the *Convention* from the orbital station, reduced the *Demiurge* programme heads and the members of the two commissions to total confusion, a confusion which was so great that the two sides—American and Soviet—decided first to have separate talks about the developments in the situation and to discuss matters from their own national points of view; and only after this would they meet for mutual talks.

The world did not yet know of the unprecedented discovery, the discovery of an extraterrestrial civilisation on the planet Mother Forest. Even the American and Soviet governments, which had been informed—in strict secrecy—of the discovery itself, had as yet been given no details of the further developments. These details were to be given later, when the two commissions arrived at an agreed point of view. Strict order was maintained throughout the aircraft carrier, no one at all was allowed to leave his post, no one was to leave the ship on any pretext or excuse, no other ship was to come within fifty kilometres of the *Convention*, and aeroplanes in the area had to change course and stay at least three hundred kilometres away.

The joint meeting was thus interrupted, and each commission, separately, discussed the report from the two *Parity* astronauts, sent from the previously unknown planet Mother Forest. The report was as follows:

"This is a transgalactic message for the Earth!

"We cannot explain things for which our Earth languages have no names, but there is much in common between our two planets.

"The Foresters are of human form, just like us. Hurrah for universal evolution! They are beautiful examples of humanoids, their skin is dark, they have light-blue hair and lilac or green eyes, and their eyelashes are a fluffy white.

"When they linked up with the *Parity* we saw them in totally transparent space suits. They smiled, and invited us on board. As we left the orbital station we stepped out of one civilisation into another.

"Their spacecraft cast off from the *Parity*, and we began to fly away into the universe at the speed of light. But inside their craft we could not feel the speed at which we were travelling

as we overcame the flow of time. The first thing we noticed, and which gave us unexpected pleasure, was the absence of weightlessness; how this is achieved we have not yet learnt. Mixing Russian and English words, they greeted us: *"Welcome nash Zvezda!"* These blue-haired creatures are about two metres tall. There were five of them in the spacecraft, four men and a woman. The woman was different not in her height, but in her purely feminine form and her slightly lighter skin. All the Foresters are fairly dark-complexioned, rather like our northern Arab peoples. We felt we could trust them from the moment we saw them.

"Three of them were pilots; one man and the woman were linguists, and knew our languages. By the time we met they had mastered more than two and a half thousand words, with the help of which they began to talk with us. Among themselves they speak a language which, of course, is totally incomprehensible to us, but its sounds remind us a little of Spanish.

"Eleven hours after leaving the *Parity* we passed beyond the borders of our solar system, but the passage was not marked by any noticeable changes. The matter of the universe is the same everywhere. But ahead we saw a reddening glow in the distance, a glow which was gradually increasing and taking up more and more of the space around it. Meanwhile we were passing by a number of planets, dark on one side and light on the other. There was a multitude of suns and moons all around us.

"We seemed to be rushing out of night into day, and suddenly we flew into the blindingly clear light of a particularly large and powerful sun.

" 'We are now in our galaxy,' the woman explained. 'This is our sun, which we call Guardian. Soon you will see our planet.'

"And indeed, we saw an unknown sun, a sun which is greater than our own both in size and in brightness.

"Incidentally, it is these qualities of the sun here, together with the fact that a day on Mother Forest lasts twenty-eight Earth hours, which we assume to be the reason for a great many geographical and biological differences between this planet and the Earth. But we shall try to explain all this in our next report, or when we return to the *Parity*. For the time

being we shall simply mention the most noticeable features of this planet.

"From up in space the planet is reminiscent of the Earth, as it is surrounded by a similar layer of atmospheric clouds. But on coming closer, to a distance of five or six thousand metres (the Foresters took us on an observation flight around their planet), it gives a view of unprecedented beauty: it has mountain ranges and hills all covered in bright green, it has rivers, seas and lakes, and in some parts—mostly around the polar areas—there are huge patches of lifeless desert with dust storms. But it was the towns and cities which made the greatest impression on us: they are islands of constructional wonders set amidst the planet's natural scenery, and they bear witness to the Foresters' extremely high level of urbanisation. Even Manhattan cannot compare with the towns and cities of the blue-haired Foresters.

"In our opinion, the Foresters represent a special phenomenon of intelligent life in the Universe. Their period of pregnancy is eleven of their planet's months. Their life expectancy is higher than ours, although they consider the main aim of society and their *raison d'être* to be the prolongation of life. On the average they live to between one hundred and thirty and one hundred and fifty, and some reach as much as two hundred years of age. The planet's population is above ten thousand billion.

"We are not yet in a position to give a systematic description of the Foresters and their civilisation and culture. We can only tell you here about the things which have struck us most.

"The Foresters use sunlight from their Guardian, and they are far more efficient at converting it into thermal or electrical energy than we are at using our hydrotechnical sources. One other interesting source of energy for them is the difference between daytime and nighttime air temperatures.

"They have learnt to control their climate. During our observation flight before landing, the craft we were in used some sort of radiation device to scatter clouds and mist. We have also learnt that they can influence the movement of air masses and of ocean currents, by means of which they can regulate the moisture and temperature on the planet's surface. Further, they can control gravity, which is of particular importance in space flights.

"But they do have an immense problem on Mother Forest, a problem which, as far as we are aware, is unknown on Earth. They do not suffer from droughts, since they can control their climate. They do not as yet have any shortages in agricultural production, despite a planetary population more than twice that of the Earth. But a significant part of the planet's surface is gradually becoming incapable of supporting life; in such places all living things are dying out by a process which the Foresters call 'internal desiccation'. During our observation flight we saw dust storms in the south-eastern part of the planet, the surface layer is degrading and losing its structure, and all the soil-forming elements in it are being burnt up; this seems to be akin to the Earth's volcanic processes, but here it has taken on the form of a slow and spreading process of radiation eruption. In this part of the planet there is a desert the size of the Sahara, and it is advancing on them year by year. This is the Foresters' greatest problem, as they have not yet learnt how to control the processes going on in the depths of their planet. The struggle against this internal desiccation is being waged with immense scientific and material resources, and no efforts are being spared to solve the problem.

"The Foresters have no Moon circling around their planet, but they know and have visited our Earth's Moon. They suppose that our Moon, at some time in the past, suffered desolation as a result of something similar to internal desiccation. When we learnt that they had visited our Moon, we started thinking: it is not far from the Moon to the Earth itself. Are we ready to meet the Foresters on our own planet? And what would be the consequences of such a meeting? Do people realise how much they have lost in their intellectual development as a result of their eternal strife?

"At the present time there is a global scientific discussion going on Mother Forest. They are trying to decide whether their energies should be directed towards understanding the nature of internal desiccation and finding means of averting this potential catastrophe, or whether they should begin looking, in good time, for a new planet elsewhere in the universe which would answer their requirements, and should transfer all their people to this new home in order to maintain and revitalise their civilisation. They do not yet know where to look for a new home, and their civilisation will be safe on their

present planet for many millions of years to come. We are surprised, therefore, that they are already considering matters which are so far in the future, and with such an ardour as though the problem were one of direct concern to the generation alive today. It does not seem as though the narrow-minded idea 'I don't care what happens after I'm gone' has occurred to anyone here. And we were ashamed of ourselves for thinking something along these lines when we learned how large a part of the gross planetary product goes towards the programme of preventing the total desiccation of the planet. The Foresters are trying to set up a barrier many thousands of kilometres in length, all around the slowly encroaching desert; they are drilling fantastically deep bore-holes, and are putting into these long-term neutralising substances which they consider will have the required effect on their planet's core.

"They are not, of course, free from problems of a social nature, problems of a moral and intellectual order. It is quite obvious that it is not so easy for over ten thousand million people to live together, no matter what prosperity they may have achieved. But the most surprising thing for us is that they have no state system as such, they have no weapons and do not know what war is. We cannot say whether, some time in their history, they had wars, state organisation, money, and all the social divisions and categories which these concepts involve; but at their present stage of development they have no conception of such instruments of oppression as the state and war. If we ever have to explain to them the essence of our endless wars on Earth, will it not seem to them to be a senseless, or even barbaric means of settling differences?

"Their whole lives are based on principles which we, with Earthbound and stereotyped patterns of thought, cannot even begin to comprehend.

"They have reached a level of collective planetary consciousness which categorically excludes the possibility of war as a means of settling disputes, and we can but assume that they have the most advanced form of civilisation in the part of the universe known to us. They seem to have reached the level of scientific development where the humanisation of time and space becomes the main *raison d'être* of intelligent beings.

"We have no intention of comparing the incomparable. People on our Earth as well, in time, will arrive at this great state of progress, and we have something to be proud of even now; but we cannot rid ourselves of the thought that perhaps mankind is in tragic error, believing that real history is merely the history of wars. And what if our path of development was an erroneous dead end from the very beginning? In that case where is mankind headed? And if the human race on Earth is in error, will it find within itself the courage to admit this and to avoid a total catastrophe? Fated to have been the Earth's first eye-witnesses of this extraterrestrial life, we have mixed feelings: fear for the future of mankind of Earth, as well as hope, since there is in the universe an example of great co-existence, whose progress does not involve contradictions which can only be settled by wars.

"The Foresters know about the existence of the Earth in what is to them outlying outer space. And they sincerely desire to enter into contact with the people of the Earth, not only out of natural curiosity, but, first and foremost, to exchange views on the experiences of our two civilisations, and to begin a new era in the development of thought and spirit in the universe's bearers of intelligent life.

"In this they foresee far more than one might imagine. Their interest in the people of the Earth is further dictated by their belief that the joint efforts of these two branches of universal reason will help to secure the infinite continuation of life, taking into account the inevitable deterioration of any form of energy and the fact that all planets are doomed in time to perish. They are concerned about the problem of 'the end of the world', even if it is removed by many billions of years, and they are already developing space projects for setting up new bases of habitation for all living things in the universe.

"Since they have spacecraft which can travel at the speed of light, they already have it in their power to visit our Earth; but they do not wish to do so without our consent and invitation, they do not wish to be unwelcome guests. They have told us that they have long sought an excuse for making our acquaintance, and, when we set up long-term orbital space stations, they realised that our meeting would not be long delayed and that it was up to them to take the initiative. They

made careful preparations and waited for a favourable opportunity; this opportunity then came our way on the *Parity*, since we were intermediate between our two planets.

"Our arrival on their planet, understandably, caused quite a sensation. In our honour the Foresters switched on a system of global telecontact, which is normally only used for very special occasions. In the air all around us we could see the faces of Foresters as though they really were there right next to us, although in fact they were many thousands of kilometres away; we could look each other in the face, smile, shake hands, talk and laugh, just as though there was direct contact. How beautiful the Foresters are, and how different they all are, even the colour of their hair varies from a fairly deep blue to a shade of ultramarine; and the old Foresters turn grey, just like us. There are also different anthropological types, since the planet has a number of ethnical groups.

"We shall tell you about all this and much more when we return to the *Parity* or to Earth, but for now we want to mention the most important point.

"The Foresters have asked us to tell you of their desire of visiting our planet when it is convenient for mankind. They suggest agreeing a programme for setting up an interplanetary half-way station, which would serve as a place for preliminary meetings and might later become a permanent relay station on the journey between our two planets. We promised to bring these suggestions to your notice, and have accordingly done so. But we are left with a feeling of anxiety in this matter.

"Are we, the people of the Earth, ready for such interplanetary meetings, are we of sufficiently mature intellect? With all the disagreements and contradictions in the world, can we act as a unified whole in the name of all mankind, in the name of the entire Earth? In order to avoid an outburst of rivalry, we beseech you to pass this question on to the United Nations, and to no one else. We also beg you not to abuse the right of veto, perhaps even to annul this right on this occasion, in view of the exceptional nature of the question. It is sad for us to think of these things being so far away across the universe, but the Earth is our home, too, and we well know its ways.

"And finally, once more about ourselves and what we have done. We realise the confusion we caused, and we know of

the emergency measures caused by our disappearance from the orbital station. We very much regret having given rise to so much alarm, but we feel that this was the one situation where we could not, indeed had no right to, turn away from the most important act of our lives. Men of strict discipline, we were obliged to go against discipline for the sake of such an opportunity.

"Let this be on our conscience, and let us bear the fitting punishment. But all this is not relevant at this moment. What is important, is that we are broadcasting from out in the universe, from a galaxy unknown to science. The blue-haired Foresters have reached an extremely high level of civilisation, and contact with them could have far-reaching effects on all our lives, on the fate of the whole human race. Dare we meet them without, of course, jeopardising the interests of the Earth?

"The Foresters are in no way threatening us; at least, as far as we can tell. But, learning from their experience, we could cause a revolution in our way of life, in everything from the means of obtaining energy from our material environment to being able to live without arms, violence and wars. This latter idea may sound absurd to you, but we can triumphantly assert that the intelligent beings on Mother Forest live precisely thus, that they have reached this state of perfection on a planet geographically and biologically similar to our Earth. As the bearers of a universal, highly-civilised way of thought, they are ready for open contact with their fellow-beings on Earth, and they want this contact to be in accordance with the requirements and dignity of both sides.

"Although we have been amazed and carried away with our discovery of an extraterrestrial civilisation, we long to return home as soon as possible, to tell people of everything we have seen here on the planet Mother Forest.

"We plan to set off on our return journey to the *Parity* in twenty-eight hours, that is, we shall spend just one more day on this planet.

"Farewell for now. Before we do set off we shall let you know our time of arrival on the *Parity*. Here we end our first message from the planet Mother Forest.

"Please, please tell our families not to worry about us.

Parity astronaut 1-2
Parity astronaut 2-1"

The meeting of the special commissions on board the aircraft carrier *Convention*, to discuss the extraordinary events on the *Parity* orbital station ended in the two commissions departing each to consult with a higher authority. One plane left the deck of the aircraft carrier and headed for San Francisco, and a few minutes later a second plane took off and headed for Vladivostok.

The *Convention* remained in position, in the northern latitudes of the Pacific Ocean, to the south of the Aleutian Islands. There was strict order on board, each man was at his post, and on the alert. Silence reigned everywhere.

* * *

By the afternoon, waves began to appear on the smooth surface of the Pacific Ocean to the south of the Aleutian Islands. A squally wind blew up from the south-east, coming from the American mainland; the wind gradually grew stronger, and began to blow steadily from one direction. The water was set in motion over this huge open expanse, it rolled heavily, it began to froth slightly and send wave after wave, billow after billow. This heralded, if not a storm, at least a lengthy spell of bad weather.

Waves like this in the open sea constituted no danger for the aircraft carrier *Convention*, and at any other time there would have been no thought of changing position. But as the return of the two planes with the commissions on board was expected very shortly, it was decided to turn the ship around to face the wind, so as to reduce the rolling motion. Everything went smoothly, and the two planes landed without any trouble, one from San Francisco, one from Vladivostok.

The two commissions returned in full, their members silent and anxious looking. Fifteen minutes after their arrival they were already in closed conference, and five minutes later an urgent coded message was sent to the *Parity* orbital station for transmission to the two *Parity* astronauts on the planet Mother Forest: "To the inspection astronauts on board the *Parity* orbital research station. Warn the *Parity* astronauts 1-2 and 2-1 on the planet called Mother Forest not to undertake any actions, but to remain where they are until they receive

specific orders to the contrary from the *Demiurge* Control Centre."

The two commissions then immediately set about explaining their positions to each other and putting forward their suggestions for a solution to the crisis in outer space.

The aircraft carrier continued to face the wind among the endlessly rolling Pacific waves. No one in the world knew that the fate of the planet Earth, was being decided on board it...

* * *

It was well after midday in the Pacific Ocean and the wind was still blowing from the south-east, the billowing waves continued to roll onwards one after the other and to give a picture of endless watery motion from horizon to horizon. The aircraft carrier *Convention* rocked gently on the waves. It was still in position, exactly equidistant between San Francisco and Vladivostok. All personnel on board were on the alert and ready for action.

Then the meeting between the two commissions on the aircraft carrier came to an end. The two *Parity* astronauts, having wilfully absented themselves from the orbital station, were still on the planet Mother Forest, and had been warned three times not to undertake any actions under any circumstances until they received specific orders from the Control Centre.

These repeated categorical demands by the Control Centre reflected not only a confusion in minds, but also the exceptionally complex and continually worsening differences between the two sides, differences which threatened to put an end to their mutual co-operation and might even lead to open confrontation. The *Demiurge* programme, which had so recently brought the two sides together in the common interests of integrated scientific and technical work, now passed into the background; it had lost all its former importance in view of the immense problem which had suddenly arisen with the discovery of an extraterrestrial civilisation. The members of both commissions clearly understood the central question: this unprecedented and incomparable discovery put to the test the very foundations of the modern world, everything

which had been taught, cultivated and developed in the consciousness of generation after generation, the whole code of mankind's existence; could anyone dare risk such a test, quite apart from considerations of the world's safety?

And here, as always in moments of crisis, the veil was drawn back fully from the basic contradictions between the two socio-political systems on the Earth.

The discussions grew into heated debates, and the differences of opinion and approach more and more crystallised into entrenched and irreconcilable positions. One could feel the imminence of confrontation, mutual threats and the type of conflict which, once it got out of hand, might lead to a world war. Each side, conscious of the dangers inherent in such an outcome, attempted to refrain from extremes. An even greater restraint was put on the members of the commissions by the need to avoid an explosion of consciousness, which could occur if the news of the extraterrestrial civilisation were to become common knowledge. No one could vouch for the consequences if the world at large learnt what the two *Parity* astronauts had discovered.

And at last the two sides came to a compromise, which was both unavoidable and strictly balanced. As a result of this compromise the Control Centre sent a coded message to the *Parity* orbital station:

"To the inspection astronauts 1-2 and 2-1. You are to make immediate contact with the *Parity* astronauts on the planet called Mother Forest. You are to make it known to them that a joint commission has studied the information provided by them about the extraterrestrial civilisation on that planet, and that a final and irrevocable decision has been made:

a) not to allow the former *Parity* astronauts to return either to the *Parity* orbital station or to the Earth, as they are to be considered personae non grata from the point of view of world civilisation;

b) to advise the inhabitants of the planet called Mother Forest that we must refuse to enter into any kind of contact with them since this would be incompatible with the historical experience, the vital interests and the current stage of development of human society on Earth;

c) to warn the former *Parity* astronauts, as well as the extraterrestrial beings in contact with them, that they should

not attempt to get in touch with anyone on the Earth nor, moreover, to approach the region of space occupied by the Earth, as happened when five extraterrestrial beings visited the *Parity* space station;

d) to set up without delay a periterrestrial defence system of automated barrage rockets to destroy any objects approaching the Earth from outer space;

e) to advise the former *Parity* astronauts that the maintenance of political stability on Earth excludes the possibility of any contact with them, that all available means will be used to ensure that contact with the *Parity* astronauts themselves or with the inhabitants of the planet called Mother Forest is not re-established in the future, and to keep knowledge of the event secret from the Earth's population. To this end, the orbital path of the *Parity* space station will be altered and the station's radio channels will be re-set;

f) to warn the extraterrestrial beings once more of the danger of attempting to approach the region of space occupied by the Earth.

Demiurge Control Centre,
from the aircraft carrier
Convention"

This decision by the joint commission meant that the *Demiurge* programme had to be put on ice for an indefinite period of time. The *Parity* orbital station was to be re-programmed onto another orbit and used for general space research. The jointly operated research ship *Convention* was to be handed over to the care of neutral Finland. When the periterrestrial defence system had been put into operation, all personnel connected with the *Parity* orbital station, all the scientific and administrative workers, and all the auxiliary personnel were to be required to sign a pledge never to mention a word to anyone about the reason for the cessation of the Control Centre's activities.

For the information of the Earth's public it was intended to announce that work on the *Demiurge* programme had been stopped until further major research had been carried out on the planet X. The carefully worded announcement was to be made as soon as the periterrestrial defence system was operative.

Immediately after the end of the meeting on board the *Convention* between the two commissions, all the documents, codes and the information from the former *Parity* astronauts, all the minutes of the various meetings, all the tapes, films and papers which had any relevance to this unfortunate incident were destroyed.

In the northern latitudes of the Pacific Ocean, to the south of the Aleutian Islands, it was afternoon. The weather was still relatively tolerable, but the sea was becoming gradually rougher and the waves were already beginning to rumble as they rolled.

The aircraft carrier's air wing was on the alert, waiting for the commission members to come out of their meeting. At last the meeting broke up and the commission members said their farewells. One group made for one plane, the other group made for the other.

Both planes then took off smoothly, despite the rolling of the ship. One plane headed for San Francisco, the other turned in the other direction, towards Vladivostok.

Washed by the winds of heaven, the planet Earth sailed on its eternal orbit. On its eternal orbit... It was a tiny grain of sand in the immeasurable infinity of space, one of an immense multitude of other grains. But it was only on this one planet, the planet Earth, that people lived. They lived as best they could and sometimes, urged on by a desire for knowledge, they tried to discover whether there were not other beings, similar to themselves, elsewhere in the universe. They argued, built hypotheses, landed on the Moon, and sent automatic spaceships to planets even further afield, but every time they realised sadly that nowhere around their Solar System was there anyone or anything similar to themselves, nor was there indeed any form of life whatsoever. Then they would forget about this, they would have no time for it, because it was far from easy to live together in harmony, and it was hard work earning their daily bread... Many even thought that other parts of the universe were none of their business. And the planet Earth sailed on, all on its own...

YURI KAZAKOV

Yuri Kazakov (1927-1983) was born in Moscow. He began to be published in 1952 and soon established himself as a major writer. His short stories have been translated in about twenty countries and have attracted considerable attention in the foreign press. Replying to questions from readers, Kazakov once wrote of himself: "You don't have the power to rebuild the world as you would like, nor does anyone else. But you do have your own truth, your own words. And you must be brave, in spite of all your misfortunes, failures and setbacks, you must try to bring people joy and go on believing that life will get better."



YOU WEPT SO SADLY IN YOUR SLEEP

It was one of those warm summer days...

I stood talking to a friend outside our house. You trotted about nearby, amid the grass and flowers which came up to your shoulders, or squatted on your heels to stare at a pine needle or a blade of grass, the vague half-smile, which I tried in vain to puzzle out, never leaving your face.

Every so often, when he got tired of running about in the hazel-bushes, Chief the spaniel trotted up to us. He would stop sideways on, jut one shoulder out like a wolf, turn his neck sharply and peer at you out of the corner of his coffee-coloured eyes waiting, begging you for an affectionate glance. At which he would instantly flop down on his front paws, wag his stumpy tail and bark conspiratorially. But for some reason

you were afraid of Chief. You walked round him cautiously, then hugged my knee, threw back your head and stared up into my face with your deep blue eyes reflecting the sky and cried joyfully, tenderly, as if you had just returned from a long journey:

"Daddy!"

And I felt an almost painful pleasure from the touch of your small hands.

This unexpected hug of yours must have moved my friend as well, because he suddenly stopped talking to ruffle your soft hair and gaze at you thoughtfully for a long time.

Now he will never look at you tenderly again, never talk to you again, because he is no more, and you don't remember him, of course, just as you don't remember many other things...

He shot himself in late autumn at the first fall of snow. But did he see the snow, did he look through the veranda window at the suddenly silenced world outside? Or did he shoot himself at night? And had it been snowing all evening or was the ground bare when he arrived on a suburban train and walked home, as if to Calvary?

For the first fall of snow makes you feel so serene, so melancholy, immerses you in such leisurely, calm meditation...

And exactly when, at what moment, had that terrible, insistent thought pierced him like a sting? A long time ago, probably... He had often told me of the bouts of depression he suffered in early spring or late autumn when he was living alone at the summer cottage, and how they made him want to shoot himself, to put an end to everything once and for all. But who hasn't said something like that in moments of anguish?

He had terrible nights when he couldn't sleep and kept thinking that someone with clammy breath was stealing into the house to cast a spell on him. That someone was death.

"Be a good chap and give me some cartridges, for goodness sake," he asked me one day. "I've run out of them, and I keep thinking there's someone walking round the house at night! Everywhere's as quiet as the grave. Go on."

I gave him five or six cartridges.

"That's enough to shoot the daylights out of them," I said, laughing.

How hard he used to work! His cheerful, active life was a constant reproach to me. You would walk over to see him—approaching from the veranda side in the summer—look up at the open window in the attic and call out quietly:

"Mitya!"

"Hello there!" he called back straightaway, his face appearing at the window, and he gazed at you with a vague absent-minded look in his eyes. Then came the faint smile, the wave of the thin arm.

"Just coming."

Then he was downstairs on the veranda in his rough sweater and he seemed to be breathing particularly deeply and rhythmically after his hard work, and you looked at him with envious pleasure, like you might look at a lively young horse straining at the reins, dying to break into a trot.

"You're going to seed!" he used to say to me when I felt ill or miserable. "You should be like me! I go for a dip in the Yasnushka every day until late autumn! You're always lounging around! Get a bit of exercise..."

It was mid-October when I saw him for the last time. He came to my place on that beautiful sunny day, well dressed as usual, wearing a smart cap. His face was sad, but we started a lively conversation, about Buddhism, for some reason, and that it was time to start writing a long novel, that the only pleasure lay in working every day, and you could only work every day if you were writing something big...

As I was seeing him off, he suddenly started crying and turned away.

"When I was the same age as your Alyosha," he said, calming down slightly, "the sky seemed so high and blue! Then it faded, but that's just age, isn't it? It's the same, as it always was, isn't it? I'm afraid of Abramtsevo, you know. I really am... The longer I live here, the more I feel attached to it. But it's wrong to get attached to one place, isn't it? Do you carry Alyosha on your shoulders? I carried mine at first, then we used to go on for bike rides into the forest, and I talked to them all the time about Abramtsevo, this ancient land of Radonezh—I so much wanted them to love it, love it properly, because it's their native land. Just look at that maple tree over there!"

Then he began talking about his plans for the winter. The

sky was so blue, and the maple leaves shone with a deep gold in the sun! There was a special warmth, a special affection in our parting...

Three weeks later, in Gagra, it came like a bolt from the blue! As if that shot at night in Abramtsevo had flown the length of Russia to find me on the Black Sea. Then, just as now as I write these lines, the sea swelled against the shore, giving off its deep smell in the darkness, while far away to the right shone a pearly string of lights framing the bay like a curved bow...

You were already five by then! We sat on the dark beach, you and I, by the surf invisible in the darkness, and listened to the rise and fall, to the damp scraping of the gravel surging in the wake of a retreating wave. I don't know what you were thinking, for you said nothing. I imagined myself walking home to Abramtsevo from the station, but not along the path I usually took. The sea vanished, and the night mountains which you could only guess at from the lights of a few houses high up,—and I walked along a cobbled path covered with the first scattering of snow, and when I looked back I could see my black footprints clearly in the ashen light snow. I turned left past the black pond in its gleaming white banks, walked into the dense darkness of the fir trees, turned right... And there in front of me at the dead end of the little street I saw his cottage, surrounded by firs, the windows blazing.

When had it happened? In the evening? Or at night?

For some reason I wanted it to have happened in the hesitant dawn of early November, that moment when you first sense the approach of day as the snow lightens and the trees emerge faintly from a dense dark mass.

I walked up to his house, unlatched the gate, went up the steps to the veranda and saw...

"Listen," he asked me one day, "if you fire point-blank from a shot-gun is the shot very strong?" "I should say so!" I replied. "If you fired at an aspen tree as thick as your arm from half a metre, say, the shot would cut through it like a razor!"

To this day I wonder what I would have done, if I had seen him sitting on the veranda with the gun cocked and one shoe off. Would I have hammered on the door, broken a window, and shouted for all the world to hear? Or would I have looked

away in horror and held my breath in the hope that, left to himself, he would change his mind, put the gun down, carefully let go of the trigger, holding it with his big toe, give a deep sigh as if he had just emerged from a nightmare, and put on his shoe.

What would he have done, if I had broken the window and shouted? Flung the gun down and rushed over to me joyfully, or, quite the reverse, looked at me with eyes already dead, but full of hate, and hurriedly pulled the trigger with his foot? My soul goes out to that house, to that night, to him, and tries to fuse with him, follows his every movement, seeking vainly to guess his thoughts and retreats, unable to...

I know he came home late that evening. What did he do in those last hours of his? First of all he changed his clothes, hanging his city suit neatly in the wardrobe as usual. Then he got some firewood to heat the stove. And ate some apples. I don't think the fatal decision took possession of him at once—a person about to commit suicide does not eat apples and prepare to light the stove.

Then he suddenly decided not to light the stove and lay down. That was probably when it came to him! What did he think of, if anything, in his last few minutes? Perhaps he just got ready? Did he cry?

Then he washed and put on some clean underwear.

The gun was hanging on the wall. He took it down, feeling its cold heaviness and the clammy steel of the barrel. The fore-end lay obediently in his left palm. The bolt catch slid stiffly to the right under his thumb, and the gun split open at the bolt, revealing the back section of its double-barrel like two tunnels. The cartridge slotted easily and smoothly into one of the barrels. My cartridge!

The lights in the house were all on. He switched on the veranda light too. Then he sat down on a chair, took off a shoe and cocked the gun with a loud click in the deathlike silence. He put the end of the barrel into his mouth and clenched his teeth, tasting the cold greased metal...

But did he sit down and take off his shoe straightaway? Or did he stand all night with his forehead pressed against the windowpane and the glass steamed up from his tears? Or did he walk round the garden, bidding farewell to the trees, the Yasnushka, the sky and his beloved bath-house? And did he

find the trigger with his toe straightaway or, with his customary clumsiness, press the wrong catch by mistake and then have a long rest, wiping off the cold sweat and preparing himself for another try? And did he close his eyes before the shot or stare wide-eyed at something until that last jet-black explosion on his brain?

No, to cut short your life as he had, took great vital strength, not weakness.

But why, why? I keep looking, but cannot find the answer. Perhaps there was secret suffering in that cheerful, active life? But there are plenty of sufferers around! No, that's not what makes a man shoot himself. Then was he marked with a fatal sign from birth? And do we all, unbeknown to us, bear a stamp that determines the course of whole life?

My soul wanders in darkness...

But then we were all alive and, as I've already said, it was the zenith of a long, long day, one of those summer days which, when we remember them in later years, seems endless.

After he had said goodbye to me, ruffled your hair again, and put his moustached and bearded lips tenderly to your forehead, which tickled you and made you burst out laughing happily, Mitya set off home, and you and I took a big apple and set off on the expedition we had been looking forward to all the morning. Seeing that we were going somewhere, Chief raced after us, caught us up at once, almost knocking you over, and, ears flapping like butterfly wings, disappeared into the forest in long, high bounds.

What a long trek lay ahead of us, almost a whole kilometer! And so many the things that awaited us on that trek, which you already knew and had been along many times, but each time, even each hour, was different from the rest, wasn't it? It was sometimes cloudy when we walked along there, or sunny, or there was dew on the ground, or the sky was overcast with rain clouds, or we heard the occasional rumble and crack of thunder, or a light rain was falling and its beadlike drops trembled on the dry lower branches of the fir trees, and your little red shoes shone lacquer-like, and the path grew oily dark, or it was windy and the aspens muttered below the rustling birch and fir tops, it was sometimes morning and sometimes afternoon, sometimes hot and sometimes cold—no day was ever the same, no hour, no bush, no tree—nothing!

This time the sky was cloudless, a serene pale blue, not the piercing azure which flows river-like into our eyes in early spring or strikes into our hearts from the gaps between the low rainclouds of late autumn. That day you were wearing brown sandals, yellow socks, red shorts and a lemon T-shirt. Your knees were scratched, your legs, shoulders and arms were white, and your big grey eyes with the pistachio-green flecks had turned a darkish blue for some reason... First we walked to the back gate, in the opposite direction from the front entrance, along a path flecked with patches of sunlight, stepping over fir-tree roots, the needles springing softly under our feet. Then you stopped in your tracks and looked around. Realising at once that you wanted a stick, without which you would not dream of going for a walk, I found a nut branch, broke it off and handed it to you.

Delighted that I had guessed what you wanted, you took it and ran on ahead, touching the trunks of trees on either side of the path with it and the tall ferns, still wet in the shade, with treble-clef scrolls at the top.

Looking down on your twinkling little legs, the delicate neck with the silvery tress and the soft tuft on your crown, I tried to imagine myself at your age, and memories crowded round me. But I could not recall the earlier years of childhood, I was always older than you, until suddenly through a clearing on the left, the forest air was filled with the warm scent of meadows basking in the sun on the other side of the small valley along which the Yasnushka flowed.

"Alyosha's little feet..." I chanted automatically.

"Are wunning down the stweet..." you chanted back dutifully, and I could see from the quiver of your transparent ears that you were smiling.

Yes, I had run like that once too, in the shadows of bygone days, and it was summer, and the sun was hot, and a fragrant breeze carried the same scent from the meadows...

I saw a big field outside Moscow, which had divided up and separated the people gathered in it. In the bunch standing by a sparse birch grove there were only women and children for some reason. Many of the women were crying and wiping their eyes with red kerchiefs. And on the other side of the field stood a column of men. Behind the column was an embankment with brownish-red trucks and further off a

chugging steam engine puffing out black smoke. Men in army shirts were pacing up and down in front of the column.

My short-sighted mother was crying too, wiping away the tears that kept welling up, squinting and asking all the time: "Can you see your father, son? Where is he? Show me which side he's on at least." "Yes, I can see him!" I replied. And I really could see my father, standing over on the right. Father could see us too. He smiled and waved from time to time, but I couldn't understand why he didn't come over to us or we go over to him.

Suddenly a kind of current ran through the crowd, and several boys and girls carrying bundles ran timidly out into the field. Thrusting a heavy bundle of linen and tinned food into my hands, mother pushed me out too, shouting after me: "Run over to your father and give it to him, son. Kiss him and tell him we'll be waiting for him!" Tired from the heat and the standing about, I ran off happily...

Together with the others, my bare sunburnt knees flashing, I raced across the field, and my heart beat harder at the thought that father would hug me, pick me up and kiss me, and I would hear his voice again and smell that nice scent of tobacco—I hadn't seen him for so long that my short memory of him seemed to have got covered with ashes and turned into pity for myself, because I missed his rough calloused hands, his voice, his eyes looking at me. I ran, looking now at the ground, now at father. I could already see the birthmark on his temple, when suddenly his face turned sad, the nearer I got to him, the more agitated the column of men where he was standing grew...

We went through the gate into the forest and turned right towards the rotunda, which our neighbour had started to build but never finished. Its grey concrete dome and columns stood out strangely amid the green of the fir and alder grove, and you liked to gaze at it admiringly.

On our left the tiny River Yasnushka rolled its shallow streams over the stones. We couldn't see it yet behind the overgrown hazel-bushes and raspberry canes, but we knew the path would lead us to the gully below the rotunda, where pine needles and the odd leaf circled slowly in a small dark pool of still water.

The sun was breaking through to us in almost perpendicular pillars. Wavy trickles of resin shone honey-like in its light. Here and there wild strawberries flamed like drops of blood, airy herds of midges swarmed, invisible birds called to one another in the thick foliage, and, flashing in a sunbeam, a squirrel leapt from tree to tree, while the branch it had left an instant ago swayed gently, and the world was full of a wonderful fragrance...

"Look, Alyosha, a squirrel! See? There it is, peeping at you..."

You looked up, saw the squirrel and dropped your stick. You always dropped it when something else suddenly attracted your attention. Watching the squirrel's movements until it disappeared, you then remembered about the stick, retrieved it and set off once more.

With high leaps as if he were trying to fly, Chief bounded towards us along the path. He stopped and stared at us for a while with his long, deep eyes, like a gazelle's, asking if he should run on or did we want to go back or turn off somewhere. I pointed silently to the path along which we were walking. He understood and rushed on ahead of us.

A minute later we heard his excited barking. It was coming from one spot, not moving along. So he wasn't chasing anybody, but had found something and was telling us to come quickly.

"Hear that?" I said to you. "Chief's found something and he's calling us."

I picked you up so you wouldn't get scratched by fir branches and to get there more quickly. The barking grew nearer and nearer, and soon, under a large and splendid birch tree standing slightly apart on the vivid green, lilac and yellow moss of a glade, we saw Chief and heard not only his barks, but also passionate, strangled sobs, when he paused for breath.

He had found a hedgehog. The birch tree was about thirty metres from the path, and I marvelled yet again at his keen scent. The moss round the hedgehog was all trampled down. Seeing us, Chief began to yelp louder than ever. I put you down, dragged Chief away by the collar, and we squatted in front of the hedgehog.

"It's a hedgehog," I said. "Say it after me: hedgehog."

"Hedgehog..." you said and touched it with your stick.

The hedgehog snorted and gave a little jump. You pulled away the stick, lost your balance and sat down on the moss.

"Don't be afraid," I said. "Only you mustn't touch him. He's rolled into a ball, see, with his needles sticking out. But when we go away he'll pop out his nose again and get on with what he was doing. He's having a walk too, like you... He has to walk a lot, because he sleeps all through the winter. His nest gets covered with snow and he goes to sleep. Do you remember the winter? Remember how we went tobogganing?"

You smiled enigmatically. Dear God, what wouldn't I give to know what you smile at so vaguely on your own or listening to me! Can it be that you know something far more important than all my knowledge and experience?

And I remembered the day when I went to fetch you from the maternity home. You took the form of a fairly heavy, as it seemed to me, tight and hard bundle, which the nurse handed to me for some reason. Even before I had carried you to the car, I sensed that there was something warm and alive inside the bundle, although your face was covered and I could not feel your breathing.

At home we unwrapped the blankets round you straightaway. I was expecting to see a red and wrinkled creature, like they always write about new-born babies, but there was no sign of redness or wrinkles. You shone white as could be, waving incredibly delicate arms and legs and looking at us solemnly with your big eyes of an indeterminate greyish-blue. You were a miracle. The only thing that marred your appearance was the piece of plaster on your navel.

You were soon wrapped up cosily again, fed and put to bed, then we went into the kitchen. Over tea the talk was the kind that women find irresistible: about nappies, breast feeding, bathing the baby and other equally important subjects. But I kept getting up to sit beside you and gaze at your face. And when I came to you the third or fourth time, I suddenly saw you smile in your sleep and your face quiver...

What did that smile mean? Were you having a dream? But what dreams could you have, what could you dream of, what could you know, where were your thoughts wandering and did you even have any thoughts then? It wasn't only the smile—

your face took on a look of exalted, prophetic knowledge, clouds drifted round it and each moment it changed, but the overall harmony of it was unspoilt, unaltered. When you were awake, whether you were crying, laughing or staring silently at the different coloured rattles strung over your cot, you never had the expression that amazed me when you were asleep, and I caught my breath and wondered what was happening to you. "When babies smile like that, it means the angels are playing with them," my mother told me later.

And so today, squatting over the hedgehog, you responded to my question with your vague smile and said nothing, so I never found out if you remembered the winter. That first winter of yours in Abramtsevo was exquisite! It snowed heavily at night, but in the day-time the sun shone with such a rosy light that the sky grew rosy too and the birch trees thick with hoar frost... You would go outside into the snow, in your felt boots and fur coat, so tubby that your hands stuck out in their warm mittens. You got onto the toboggan, always taking a stick with you,—several sticks of varying lengths were leaning up against the porch, and you chose a different one each time,—then we pulled you out through the gate, and the thrilling journey began. Trailing the stick along in the snow, you started a conversation with yourself, the sky, the forest, the birds, the swish of snow under our feet and under the toboggan runners, and everything listened to you and understood, only we did not understand, because you could not talk yet. You made all sorts of fascinating sounds, gurgling and babbling, and to us all your goo-goo-goos and ta-ta-tas and la-la-las meant only that you were happy.

Then you went quiet, and when we looked round your stick was lying blackly a long way back on the path and you were fast asleep, arms sticking out stiffly and rosy cheeks glowing. We pulled you along for another hour or two, and you slept all the time, so deeply that when we finally carried you into the house and undressed you, unbuttoning and taking everything off, then put you to bed, you didn't wake up...

When we had finished watching the hedgehog, we set off down the path again and soon reached the rotunda. You saw it first and stopped, exclaiming as usual:

"Big tower, pwetty tower!"

For a while you surveyed it at a distance, repeating in an amazed voice, as if you had seen it for the first time: "Big tower, pwetty tower!" We walked up to it, and you touched each of its columns in turn with your stick. Then you looked down, into the lap of a clear pool, and I gave you my hand at once. So, hand in hand, we walked carefully down the slope to the water's edge. A little further downstream there were shoals, and the water there rippled and rang. But the pool seemed motionless, and the only way you could detect the current was by watching a leaf for a long time as it moved to the shallows almost as slowly as the minute hand on a watch. I sat down on a fallen fir tree and lit a cigarette, knowing I would have to stay here until you had savoured all the pool's delights.

Dropping your stick, you went up to a convenient root by the water's edge, lay on it face down and began staring into the water. Strangely enough, you didn't like playing with ordinary toys that summer, only studying tiny objects. You could spend ages pushing a grain of sand, a pine needle or a tiny blade of grass round your palm. A minute flake of paint, which you had chipped off the wall of the house, sent you into rapt contemplation. Life, the existence of butterflies, bees, flies and midges, fascinated you far more than the existence of cats, dogs, cows, magpies, squirrels and birds. What infinity, what endless multitude opened up before you, when, lying on the root, you moved your face down until it was almost touching the water, and surveyed the bottom of the pool! All those grains of sand, large and small pebbles of all shades, that delicate green fluff on the big stones, all those transparent little fish, hanging motionless or darting suddenly to one side, and all those microscopic objects visible only to your eye!

"Fishes swim..." you informed me after a while.

"Ah," I said, walking over and sitting down beside you. "So they haven't gone off to the big river yet, eh? They're tiny fish, tiddlers..."

"Tiddwers..." you agreed happily.

The water in the pool was so transparent that only the reflection of the blue sky and treetops in it made it visible. You leaned over the root and scooped up a handful of pebbles lying on the pool bed. A cloud of minute grains of sand formed over the bed, hovered for a moment, then subsided.

You tossed the pebbles into the water, the reflected trees quivered, and from the haste with which you scrambled up, I knew you had remembered your favourite pastime. It was time to throw stones.

I sat down again on the fallen tree trunk, while you chose a nice big stone, inspected it fondly all over, walked up to the water's edge and tossed it into the middle of the pool. Spray flew up, as the stone, amid wavy streams of air, sank to the bottom, and circles widened in the water. Delighting in the sight of the agitated water, you waited until it calmed down, picked up another stone, inspected it carefully, like the first, and threw it...

And so you went on throwing, admiring the splashes and the waves, and the world around you was quiet and beautiful—the trains could not be heard from here, no planes flew overhead and not a soul walked past, no one saw us. Only Chief appeared occasionally on one side of the gully or the other, tongue hanging out, then ran into the river with a splash, lapped noisily, and disappeared again after an enquiring look at us.

A mosquito settled on your shoulder. You did not notice it for a long time, then chased it away, frowned and came up to me.

"Mosquito bite..." you said, wincing.

I scratched your shoulder, blew on it and patted it.

"Well, what shall we do now? Throw some more stones or walk a bit further?"

"Walk a bit furver," you decided.

I picked you up and waded across the Yasnushka. We had to cross a hot valley with frothing clouds of meadow-sweet all along it. The white caps seemed to melt into hot streams in the sun and were full of the contented drone of bees.

The path began to rise, first amid firs and hazel, then oaks and birches, until it led us to a large meadow edged by forest to the right and opening out into an undulating plain on the left. We went on climbing, now across the field, higher and higher, until we reached the top and could see for miles around. In the distance was the horizon with the faint lines of aerials and a light haze over invisible Zagorsk. Haymaking had begun in the meadow, and although the hay was still in swathes, a faint breeze already wafted the scent of it drying.

You and I sat down amid grass and flowers as yet unmown. They came up to my shoulders, but right up to your head, so all you could see above you was the sky. Remembering the apple, I got it out of my pocket, polished it on the grass until it shone and gave it to you. You held it in both hands and bit into it at once, and your bite left a mark like a squirrel's.

All around us stretched one of Russia's oldest lands, Radonezh, a small principality in what later became Muscovy. Two kites circled smoothly and slowly high up over the edge of the field. Nothing remained of the past for you and me. The very land had changed, the villages and forests, and Radonezh had disappeared without trace. Only the memory of it remained, and those two kites up there circling as they might have done a thousand years ago, and perhaps the Yasnushka, flowing along its ancient bed...

You went on eating the apple, but I could see your thoughts were far away. You noticed the kites, too, and watched them for some time. Butterflies fluttered over you. Some of them, attracted by the red colour of your shorts, tried to sit on them, but then flew away quickly, while you watched their entrancing flight. You spoke little and briefly, but I could see from your face and eyes that you were thinking all the time. Oh, how I longed to be you just for a moment and to know your thoughts! For you were already a person!

Yes, our world was a blessed, wonderful one! There were no bombs, no burning towns and villages, no flies buzzing over piles of young corpses on the roads, the children were not stiff with cold, or wandering around in flea-infested rags. They did not live in ruins and holes like wild beasts. They still wept childish tears, but for quite a different reason... Was this not happiness, was it not bliss?

I looked around again and thought that this day, these clouds which perhaps no one but you and me was watching at that particular moment, the forest river below and the pebbles on its bed thrown there by your hand, the clear streams of water flowing round them, the meadow air, the whitish well-trodden path in the field between walls of bluish-silvery oats, and the little village, as always pretty from a distance, with the quivering horizon beyond it—this day, like a few other best days of my life, will stay with me forever.

But do you remember it? Will you ever look far back into

the past and feel that the years since then have not existed and you are once more a small boy running shoulder-deep through flowers and chasing the butterflies? Surely you must remember me and you and the sun beating down on your shoulders, the taste and sound of that incredibly long summer day?

Where does it go, by what strange law is it cut off and wrapped in the mists of oblivion, where does that time of delicate infancy, life's beginning, the happiest, most dazzling time of all, disappear?

I even cried out in despair at the thought that the greatest time of all, the time when a person is born, is separated from us by a kind of veil. And you too! You already knew so much, had already acquired a character, habits, learnt to speak and, even better, to understand what other people said. You already had likes and dislikes...

No matter whom you ask, everyone's earliest memory is from the age of five or six. But what about before that? Perhaps those years are not completely forgotten and occasionally return to us in sudden flashes from very early childhood, from the very source of our days? Hasn't almost everyone experienced at some time or other that sudden sensation of *déjà vu*, sparked off by the sight of something perhaps quite ordinary and mundane, like a puddle on an autumn path, say, or even a sound or smell, when you find yourself thinking: "This has happened to me before! But when, where? Was it in this life or another one?" And you try in vain to remember, to seize hold of that moment in the past.

It was time for your afternoon nap, so we set off home. Chief had run up long ago, trampled himself a nest in the thick grass, then stretched out and gone to sleep in it, paws quivering from time to time.

The house was quiet. Bright squares of sunlight lay on the floors. As I undressed you in your room and put your pyjamas on, you managed to remember everything you had seen that day. At the end of our conversation you gave two frank yawns. I put you in bed and went to my room. I think you were asleep before I got to the door. I sat by the open window, lit a cigarette and started thinking about you. I tried to imagine your future life, but strangely enough I didn't want to see you grown up, shaving, taking girls out and smoking cigarettes... I

wanted to see you as a young boy for as long as possible, not as you were then, that summer, but at the age of ten, say. The places we would visit together and the things we would do!

Then I returned from the future to the present and thought sadly once more that you were wiser than me, that you knew something I had known once but now forgotten... And that everything in the world was created to be seen through the eyes of a child! That yours is the Kingdom of Heaven! These words were not uttered today, so people must have sensed the mysterious superiority of children thousands of years ago. What makes them better than us? Their innocence or a kind of higher knowledge which disappears with age?

More than an hour passed like this. The sun had moved round and the shadows lengthened, when you started crying.

I put out my cigarette and went into your room, thinking you had woken up and wanted something.

But you were fast asleep, knees drawn up. You were crying so hard that the pillow soon got wet. Sobbing with a bitter, hopeless despair. You never cried like that when you hurt yourself or were naughty. You simply howled then. But now you seemed to be mourning something lost forever. You were choking with the sobs, and your voice had changed!

Are dreams nothing more than a confused reflection of reality? If so, what reality was reflected in your dream? What had you seen apart from our attentive, loving eyes, apart from our smiles, your toys, the sun, the moon and the stars? What had you heard apart from the sound of water, the rustling forest, birds singing, the gentle patter of rain on the roof and your mother's lullaby? What had you experienced apart from the quiet joy of living to make you weep so bitterly in your sleep? You had never suffered and had no regrets about the past, nor did you know the fear of death! What were you dreaming of? Or does our heart grieve already in infancy at the thought of the sufferings that lie ahead?

I tried cautiously to wake you up, patting you on the shoulder and stroking your hair.

"Wake up, old chap," I said, pulling your arm lightly. "Get up, Alyosha! Alyosha! Get up!"

You awoke, sat up quickly and stretched out your hands towards me. I took you into my arms and hugged you to me, chanting in a deliberately cheerful voice: "There, there!

Never mind! It was just a bad dream. Look at the lovely sun!" And I began pulling the curtains.

The room was flooded with light, but you went on crying, your face buried in my shoulder, gasping for breath and digging your little fingers into my neck so hard that it hurt.

"We'll have lunch in a minute... See that bird flying up there... Where's our fluffy little Vaska? There, there, Alyosha, don't be upset, old chap, it's all over now... Is that Mummy coming?" I said anything that came into my head, trying to cheer you up.

Gradually you began to calm down. Your lips were still quivering, but a smile was breaking through. Then at last your face lit up and shone at the sight of the little glazed jug you were so fond of, hanging by the window, and you said lovingly, savouring the words:

" 'ittoo jug..."

You did not stretch out your hand or make any attempt to take it, like children usually snatch up a favourite toy. No, you looked at it with tear-washed shining eyes, delighting in its shape and glazed painting.

I washed your face, tied on your bib and sat you down at the table, then suddenly realised something had happened. You didn't bang your spoon on the table, as usual, or laugh, or shout "Huwwy up!" You just stared at me gravely and said nothing. I felt you slipping away from me. Your soul, which had been fused with mine, was now far away and would grow more and more apart each year. You were no longer me, a continuation of me, and my soul could no longer catch you up. You would go away forever. In your deep, unchildlike stare I saw your soul leave me. It looked at me with compassion, bidding me a final farewell.

I reached out for you, hurried to get closer to you at least. I could see that I was falling behind, that my life was carrying me along the old path, while you were going your way.

Despair and grief took hold of me. Yet faintly, hoarsely, a voice inside me whispered the hope that our souls would meet again one day never more to part. Yes! But where, when would that be?

I, too, was close to tears then, my son.

You were eighteen months old that summer.

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